

**War in the 'Cradle of Civilization':
British Perceptions of Mesopotamia, 1907- 1921**

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Abstract

Drawing on a wide variety of historical and literary sources, this thesis argues that the First World War transformed British perceptions of Mesopotamia, distancing it from long-established associations with myth, antiquity and fable and relating it instead to Britain's wartime experiences and potential post-war choices. The first chapter examines pre-war perceptions of Mesopotamia. Through an analysis of British travel writing and journalism from the years 1907-1914, it locates early twentieth-century British perceptions of Mesopotamia within the well-established tradition of travel to, and writing about, Arabia. Focusing on accounts of the siege of Kut (December 1915 - April 1916) – one of the defining episodes of the Mesopotamian campaign – the second chapter explores the impact of the first two years of the war on British perceptions of Mesopotamia. In particular, this chapter asks what role discourses of race and civilization played in shaping British reactions to the 'cradle of civilization' and to the Indian servicemen serving alongside them. Through a close examination of the archives of the Mesopotamia Commission, Chapter Three investigates the significance of 'British prestige in the East' in the conduct of the Mesopotamian campaign, particularly in relation to events leading to the siege of Kut. In order to push north to Baghdad and beyond in the final two years of the war, British commanders built an infrastructure that transformed Mesopotamia. Chapter Four looks at the impact of the modern in a region defined for many Britons by its associations with ancient or biblical sites and civilizations. The final chapter examines the years between the Armistice of Mudros and the coronation of Faisal. Looking closely at media and fictional accounts of the revolt of 1920, it traces the impact of both pre-war and wartime conceptions of Mesopotamia upon representations of the region in these pivotal years.

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Introduction

On 23 August 1921, *The Times* announced the coronation of King Faisal I of Iraq to its readers: ‘To-day’, the paper proclaimed, ‘the EMIR FEISAL is to be crowned King of Mesopotamia, or Irak, as the territory is now officially described. Through his coronation a new Arab State will be constituted.’¹ This thesis charts changing British perceptions of Mesopotamia from the years preceding the First World War until the creation of the ‘new Arab State’ under British auspices. Donald Maxwell’s account of his time as an official war artist in Mesopotamia, *A Dweller in Mesopotamia: Being the Adventures of an Official War Artist in the Garden of Eden*, was published in 1921 – the year in which Mesopotamia ceased to be known by that name in Britain. Reflecting on the changes brought about by the British occupation of ‘the Garden of Eden’, Maxwell noted that ‘before the war [...] Mesopotamia was a more distant land than it is to-day’.² This thesis argues that the First World War brought Mesopotamia closer to Britons, removing it from long-entrenched associations with myth, antiquity and legend and locating it, instead, in Britain’s wartime experiences and post-war politics.

The first chapter looks at how Mesopotamia was envisaged in Britain between the years 1907 and 1914 and explores the consequences of the British affinity with Arabia, which Katherine Tidrick identifies in her history of the concept of the Arab in Britain: *Heart Beguiling Araby: The English Romance with Arabia* (1981). Tidrick attributes this familiarity to ‘two books which occupied a prominent place in the reading of every literate nineteenth-century child – the Bible and the *Arabian Nights*’.³ This chapter outlines the ways in which Mesopotamia was represented in Britain in contemporary editions of the *Arabian Nights* stories, as well as in accounts of Mesopotamia by travellers, Arabists and journalists. It argues that long-entrenched perceptions of Mesopotamia as the seat of ancient empires, or even as the Garden of Eden itself, served as a lens through which British travellers saw and represented the

¹ ‘The KING of Mesopotamia’, *The Times*, 23 August 1921, p.9.

² Donald Maxwell, *A Dweller in Mesopotamia: Being the Adventures of an Official War Artist in the Garden of Eden* (London: John Lane, 1921), p. 16.

³ Kathryn Tidrick, *Heart Beguiling Araby: The English Romance with Arabia* [1981] (London: I.B. Tauris, 1989), p. 36. More recently, scholars have begun to re-assess the significance of the *Arabian Nights* in Britain. Notably, Marina Warner’s project titled ‘Stranger Magic: Charmed States in the Wake of the Arabian Nights’ (yet to be published).

region in these pre-war years. Their disappointment in the simplicity of the place they believed to be the cradle of their own civilization led them to create a vision of Mesopotamia and of its peoples as frozen at an earlier phase of their evolution.

In examining the perceptions of British travellers to Mesopotamia in the early twentieth century, Priya Satia's doctoral thesis 'The Secret Center: Arabia [sic.] Intelligence in British Culture and Politics, 1900-1932'⁴ and James Canton's doctoral thesis 'From Cairo to Baghdad: British Travel Writing on Arabia, 1882–2003'⁵ have some shared interests with my own research. Both define Arabia broadly to include the Mesopotamian provinces or *vilayets* of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul. While many of those whose journeys form part of Canton and Satia's investigations also play an important role in the arguments that follow, the narrower focus of my study has often resulted in a different engagement with the same sources.

As I will discuss, there was debate in this period over the inclusion of all three Mesopotamian provinces in some definitions of Arabia. This is unsurprising given changing conceptions of Arabia itself. As a result of shifting definitions of the term, Satia and Tidrick conclude that Arabia was less a tangible place, locatable on a map than a cultural signifier. Satia notes that 'Arabia was a geographic and cultural imaginary',⁶ and Tidrick describes Arabia as 'a country of the mind more real than any place on a map'.⁷ Though Tidrick sets her theoretical approach apart from that of Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978),⁸ in Satia and Tidrick's insistence on the lack of specificity of the term 'Arabia', and in their assertion that the term tells us more about the British travellers who used it, than it does cartographically about the region, the overlaps between their conclusions and Said's thesis are clear.⁹

It is impossible to write about the Middle East without drawing on Edward Said's seminal work, and, particularly in Chapter One of this thesis, the

⁴ Priya Satia, 'The Secret Center: Arabia Intelligence in British Culture and Politics, 1900–1932' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California, 2004).

⁵ James Canton, 'From Cairo to Baghdad: British Travel Writing on Arabia, 1882–2003' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Essex, 2008).

⁶ Satia, 'The Secret Center', p. 6.

⁷ Tidrick, p. 37.

⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* [1978](London: Penguin Books, 2003)

⁹ Tidrick writes: 'I do not attempt to argue, as Edward Said does in his controversial study *Orientalism*, published shortly after the present book was completed, that writers on the Middle East are primarily to be understood as prisoners of an institutionalized system of discourse which makes it impossible for them to regard Orientals as human beings like themselves. Their faults were legion, but more various and more interesting.' Tidrick, p. 2.

influence of Said's *Orientalism* is palpable. In the 30 years since the publication of his groundbreaking study, Said's conclusions have been criticised by many scholars; it has been pointed out that the force of Said's argument painted a black and white picture of the relationship between the west and its Orient where shades of grey must surely have existed.¹⁰ Whilst accepting much of the criticism of *Orientalism*, I have often been surprised by the extent to which accounts I examine fit the model Said outlines: the nuances that scholars have called for are uncannily scarce in some of the representations of Mesopotamia I trace in the following chapters. However, there are many occasions where my conclusions diverge from Said's ideas.

My interest is in the very specificity of the idea of Mesopotamia during this period. I argue, contrary to some of Satia's conclusions, that while the inscrutable mysteries that surrounded Mesopotamia held an undeniable attraction for many of the individuals whose journeys I trace, these travellers also sought Mesopotamia out for its defining landmarks and history. Although it was undoubtedly located within broader categories such as the East or Orient, Mesopotamia had many attractions which made it a desirable travel destination in and of itself. Even those who, like Gertrude Bell, loved its uncharted deserts visited Mesopotamia for sites that could not be found elsewhere. Whether they went in search of Nineveh or the Arch of Ctesiphon; the remains of Abbasid Baghdad; to wander through the land of the *Arabian Nights*; to follow in the footsteps of Roman or Hellenic emperors, or to see the site of the Garden of Eden, travellers in the early twentieth century sought Mesopotamia out not merely because it may or may not have formed a part of Arabia, a seemingly indefinable place, but because it held attractions and significance in its own right.

To say this is not, of course, to deny the discourses of power at play in the encounters this thesis examines; here Mary Louise Pratt's term 'contact zones' has proved immensely useful in helping to understand how the interaction between Britons and Mesopotamia 'created' different versions of the region in the years 1907-

¹⁰ Criticism responding to Said's *Orientalism* is extensive. See for example: Aijaz Ahmed, *In Theory, Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); James Clifford, 'On Orientalism' in *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997 [1988]); Bernard Lewis, 'The Question of Orientalism,' *New York Review of Books*, 24 June, 1982, pp. 49-56 and Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

1921.¹¹ Nor do I mean to suggest that the borders of Mesopotamia itself were stable, or specifically defined in this period. What, therefore, did commentators mean when they wrote of 'Mesopotamia' in the early twentieth century?

Definitions of Mesopotamia

British travellers and commentators conceived of Mesopotamia as a geographically and culturally specific place, but also as part of a much greater East or Orient. When they referred to Mesopotamia, they were describing an area that stretched from the Persian Gulf to the borders of Persia, Syria and Asia Minor. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the name Mesopotamia derives from the Greek for 'between rivers' or 'between the rivers'; it is the second of these translations that is most often cited. The *OED* defines Mesopotamia as 'a region in south-west Asia between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, now in Iraq, site of the civilizations of Sumer, Babylon, and Assyria', and notes that the word Mesopotamia 'occurs as a place name in English contexts from Old English onwards'. In the years 1900 - 1914, it was used alongside more specific terms such as the Jazirah, which denoted the northern part of Mesopotamia, and Irak or Irak Arabi stretching south to the Persian Gulf, and much broader terms such as the Orient, the East or Arabia.

In a paper titled 'Journeys in North Mesopotamia', the traveller and politician who would give his name to the infamous Sykes-Picot agreement, Sir Mark Sykes, used very specific terminology to refer to Mesopotamia, and to the Jazirah within it, but also more general terms such as the Orient. Sykes argued that in Mesopotamia 'there was never any recrudescence of stable imperial power which is absolutely necessary for the development of prosperity in an Oriental country'.¹² Sykes's paper, which was given at the Royal Geographical Society on 11 March, 1907 and published later that year in the Society's journal, was almost entirely devoted to locating and defining Mesopotamia geographically, historically and anthropologically,

¹¹ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

¹² Mark Sykes, 'Journeys in North Mesopotamia', *The Geographical Journal*, 30, (1907), 237-254. (p. 246).

yet he alternated between the use of very specific terms and broad generalisations about Mesopotamia as an 'Oriental country'.

It is unclear whether Mesopotamia was actually located within Arabia in this period. The 1911 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defined Arabia in a way that excludes parts of Mesopotamia:

A peninsula in the South-West of Asia, lying between 34° 30' and 12° 45' and 60 E., is bounded W. and E. by the gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf. Its northern or land boundary is more difficult to define; most authorities, however, agree in taking it from El Arish on the Mediterranean, along the southern border of Palestine, between the dead sea and the gulf of Akaba, then bending northwards along the Syrian border nearly to Tadmur, thence eastwards to the edge of the Euphrates valley near Anah, and thence south-east to the mouth of the Shat el Arab at the head of the Persian gulf – the boundary so defined includes the northern desert, which belongs geographically to Arabia rather than to Syria; while on the same grounds lower Mesopotamia and Irak, although occupied by an Arab population, are excluded.¹³

However, as James Canton notes, there appears also to have been a general understanding of the term Arabia as denoting those lands populated by Arabs, thus including Mesopotamia.¹⁴ Some maps of Arabia from this period, such as Captain Leachman's 'Map of North East Arabia Showing the Routes of Captain G. E. Leachman,' indicate that Mesopotamia was definitively located in Arabia. This map, dated 1910, clearly includes vast swathes of Mesopotamia from the Persian Gulf to north of Baghdad unambiguously labelled 'Irak Arabi'.¹⁵

[PTO]

¹³ 'Arabia' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature and General Information*, 11th edn (1911)

¹⁴ Canton, p. 3.

¹⁵ Cited in: G. E. Leachman, 'A Journey in North Eastern Arabia' *The Geographical Journal*, 37 (1911), 265-274.



Figure 1 'Map of North East Arabia Showing the Routes of Captain G. E. Leachman'.

Mrs. Hume-Griffith, a missionary who accompanied her husband to the Middle East, also located Mesopotamia within Arabia. Hume-Griffith wrote several accounts of their time in the region, in which she reflected on the lives of the women of what she

termed the East. Her 1909 book titled *Behind the Veil in Persia and Turkish Arabia: An Account of An Englishwoman's Eight Years' Residence Amongst the Women of the East* has many chapters devoted to Mesopotamia.¹⁶

Other sources, however, are more ambiguous, and although they do not overtly exclude southern Mesopotamia, it is unclear whether they entirely include it. Captain Fraser Hunter's 'Map of Arabia and the Persian Gulf' was published in 1910 as part of the Indian Survey. Hunter's *Notes on the Map of Arabia and the Persian Gulf: With a General Index of Place Names on the Map* includes both 'Basrah' and Baghdad and gives their locations on 'the map of Arabia'.¹⁷ Although the map includes lower Mesopotamia from the Persian Gulf to Baghdad, since it also includes Persia and labels Mesopotamia clearly, it is difficult to tell whether Mesopotamia is part of Arabia or simply adjacent to it. An official War Office 'Sketch Map of Arabia' dated 1906 also includes the same portion of Mesopotamia. However, the smaller 'Map of Koweit and Surrounding Country', illustrated on the same document and reproduced below, clearly distinguished Mesopotamia as part of 'Turkey in Asia'.¹⁸

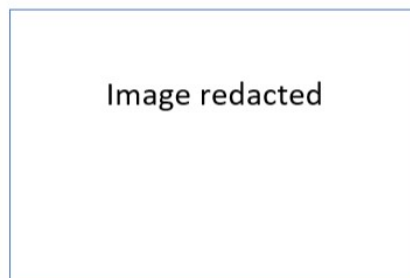


Figure 2. Inset of 'Map of Koweit and Surrounding Country'.

¹⁶ M. E. Hume-Griffith, *Behind the Veil in Persia and Turkish Arabia: An Account of An Englishwoman's Eight Years' Residence Amongst the Women of the East* (London: Seeley & Co, 1909).

¹⁷ Captain Fraser Hunter, *Notes on the Map of Arabia and the Persian Gulf: With a General Index of Place Names on the Map* (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1910), pp. 31 and 25 respectively.

¹⁸ War Office [Intelligence Division], 'Sketch Map of Arabia', *IDWO 1835*, Scale 1:7 500 000. Inset of 'Map of Koweit and Surrounding Country' at 1:2,027,520 (London: War Office Intelligence Division, 1906). [Held at British Library, Maps MOD IDWO 1835]

Another geographical descriptor that included Mesopotamia was the Near or Nearer East: Zachary Lockman argues that this term came into use because ‘in the nineteenth century many Europeans [...] had come to regard ‘the orient’ as too broad a category.’¹⁹ The archaeologist and traveller David George Hogarth devoted over half of a book titled *The Nearer East* to discussions of Mesopotamia and described it as:

A term of current fashion for a region which our grandfathers were content to call simply The East. Its area is generally understood to coincide with those classic lands, historically the most interesting on the surface of the globe, which lie about the eastern basin of the Mediterranean Sea; but few probably could say off-hand where should be the limits and why.²⁰

Hogarth suggests that the referent ‘Nearer East’ was arbitrarily assigned and did not serve to clarify the borders of the region: the Nearer East was a term that denoted a portion of what would once have simply been the East.

Lockman describes how the term Near East was itself replaced by the more specific Middle East in the early twentieth century. The Middle East was a term ‘coined in 1902 by the noted American military historian, Alfred Thayer Mahan. [...] Mahan demarcated a Middle East which he regarded as stretching from Arabia all the way across Persia and Afghanistan to the borders of today’s Pakistan’.²¹ The term was popularised by *The Times’* correspondent in Tehran, Valentine Chirol.²² In his book *The Middle East Question or Some Political Problems of Indian Defence*, Chirol defined the Middle East as ‘the regions of Asia which extend to the borders of India or command the approaches to India, and which are consequently bound up with the problems of Indian political as well as military defence’.²³ For Chirol, the primary significance of the ‘Middle East’ was its relationship to India. Despite his insistence on the area’s importance, however, the term ‘Middle East’ was not widely used by other commentators on Mesopotamia during this period.

¹⁹Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), pp. 96-7.

²⁰D.G. Hogarth, *The Nearer East* (London: William Heinemann, 1902), p. 1.

²¹Lockman, p. 96-7.

²²Lockman, p. 97. See also Billie Melman, ‘The Middle East/ Arabia: “The Cradle of Islam”’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 105-121.

²³Valentine Chirol, *The Middle East Question or Some Political Problems of Indian Defence* (London: John Murray, 1903), pp. 4-5.

The growing specificity of terms to describe what we still call the Middle East suggests that the turn of the century saw a growth in interest in the area by western commentators. Such an increase in scholarship, or commentary, on the Middle East would have necessitated a more accurate terminology with which to refer to the lands that had hitherto simply been understood as the Orient, East or Arabia.

The Mesopotamian Campaign

The First World War was the starting place for my interest in this project. Mesopotamia was always seen as a side-show of the First World War; for Liddell Hart, the campaign was nothing more than ‘a fresh diversion of force from the centre of military gravity’.²⁴ Perhaps as a result, where the Mesopotamian campaigns are mentioned in modern histories of the First World War, the siege of Kut is the defining, or in some cases the only, event represented.

The siege is the focus of the few pages that Hew Strachan devotes to the actions of British forces in Mesopotamia in his *The First World War: A New Illustrated History*.²⁵ It is likewise the centrepiece of Martin Gilbert’s account of British and Indian forces in Mesopotamia. Gilbert’s *First World War* details Indian Expeditionary Force D’s progress before Townshend’s attempt on Baghdad and their subsequent capture of the city in 1917, but the focus of his treatment of the campaign is the siege of Kut, and the ill fate of those men who were taken into captivity after the surrender of April 1916.²⁶ Mesopotamia is mentioned in passing in two sentences in Niall Ferguson’s history of the war, *The Pity of War*. He stresses that the deployment of British forces anywhere but to the Western Front was a ‘perilous’ gamble.²⁷ Robert Jones’s article ‘Kut’ is the only reference to Mesopotamia in Cowley’s *The Great War*.²⁸ The focus of John Morrow’s *The Great War: An Imperial History* is on the impact of the war on the European empires. His treatment of the Mesopotamian campaign is,

²⁴ B. H. Liddell Hart, *The World War 1914-1918* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930), p.207.

²⁵ Hew Strachan, *The First World War: A New Illustrated History* (London: Pocket Books, 2003).

²⁶ Martin Gilbert, *First World War* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994).

²⁷ Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 291.

²⁸ Robert. F. Jones, ‘Kut’ in *The Great War: Perspectives on the First World War* ed. by Robert Cowley (London: Pimlico, 2004), pp. 198- 216.

therefore, primarily concerned with how the war changed the nature of British influence in the former Ottoman territories.²⁹ John Keegan's emphasis is almost solely on Kut. He devotes very little space to the Mesopotamian campaign, noting only the significant events: predominantly the events leading to the siege of Kut, and a brief discussion of the consequences of the capture of Baghdad in 1917.³⁰ Representations of the siege, therefore, are to a large extent synonymous with those of the Mesopotamian campaign as whole in modern histories of the First World War.

In Britain, contemporary newspaper coverage of the early Mesopotamian campaign was sparse. Only in the run-up to Townshend's attempt on Baghdad in late 1915 did the British media begin to take a serious interest in events in Mesopotamia. In an effort to address British perceptions of Mesopotamia in these years, this thesis examines in some detail the cultural and political significance of the siege of Kut, and its impact on British perceptions of Mesopotamia. Chapter Two looks at the reactions of the men and women sent to serve in the 'neglected war' between the years 1914 and 1916.³¹ The chapter uses the siege of Kut to examine how discourses of race shaped the reactions of servicemen to 'the cradle of civilization', its inhabitants and the Indian men serving alongside them. The interest in the siege of Kut during the war was translated into a number of published accounts by those who survived it: Charles Townshend's own *My Campaign in Mesopotamia* (1920), Major Edward Sandes's *In Kut and Captivity* (1920) and E.O. Mousely's oft-cited *The Secrets of a Kuttite: An Authentic Story of Kut, Adventures in Captivity and Stamboul Intrigue* (1921), to name but a few.³² These accounts concentrated on the suffering of the British troops, largely ignoring or lamenting the behaviour of Indian soldiers.

Although Charles Townshend's reputation suffered after the war, his assertion that the inferiority of the Indian troops under his command contributed to the surrender of the garrison in April, 1916 has recently been re-examined by historians. Nicholas Gardner's article 'Sepoys and the Siege of Kut-al-Amara' has attempted to see beyond the racial bias in Townshend's account of the siege, to argue

²⁹ John H. Morrow Jr., *The Great War: An Imperial History* (London: Routledge, 2004).

³⁰ John Keegan, *The First World War* (London: Hutchinson, 1999).

³¹ This is the title of A. J. Barker's influential history of the campaign: A. J. Barker, *The Neglected War: Mesopotamia 1914-1918* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967).

³² Edward Opoliki Mousely, *The Secrets of a Kuttite: An Authentic Story of Kut, Adventures in Captivity and Stamboul Intrigue* (London: John Lane, 1921); Edward Warren Caulfield Sandes, *In Kut and Captivity: With the Sixth Indian Division* (London: John Murray, 1919); Charles Vere Ferrer Townshend, Sir, K.C.B., *My Campaign in Mesopotamia [...]* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1920).

that the refusal of Indian troops to eat horsemeat did indeed materially affect their health, and therefore seriously damaged Townshend's ability to break out to meet with the Tigris Relief force in 1916.³³

Chapter Two does not enter into the argument amongst military historians as to the extent of blame that should be apportioned to Townshend and his commanding officer. Instead, it investigates how those men who lived through the siege of Kut recalled or recounted their experiences. This chapter examines how the recollections of those who served under Charles Townshend compared to his and other published accounts of the siege of Kut. For those serving in Mesopotamia, the siege of Kut was significant not only because it was a major surrender of British-led forces, but because of its tragic aftermath: the ill-treatment of soldiers taken captive after Kut became infamous in Britain. This chapter compares published accounts and histories of the siege of Kut-al-Amara, which often maintained that Arab and Kurdish guards had been responsible for some of the worst maltreatment, with the recollections of those who survived it. In so doing, it assesses the impact of the siege – and its resultant mythologies – on British perceptions of Mesopotamia and its inhabitants.

Despite the publication of more modern accounts of the war such as Ron Wilcox's *Battles on the Tigris* (2006) or Paul K. Davis's *Ends and Means: The British Mesopotamian Campaign and Commission* (1994), A. J. Barker's study remains the most influential history of the campaign in Mesopotamia. Far more accessible than Moberly's four-volume official history of the campaign, Barker's 1967 history, *The Neglected War*, is often cited as the source for any detail about the Mesopotamian campaign in broader histories of the war.³⁴

It is unsurprising, given the brevity of most accounts of the Mesopotamian campaign in modern histories, that whilst some of Barker's analysis is reproduced, other elements have simply not been included. For Barker, it was largely General Nixon's failures as a commander which led to the surrender of the garrison at Kut. In particular, Barker criticises Nixon's failure to assess accurately the needs of his force in terms of river transport and medical supplies, his failure to listen to the advice

³³ Nikolas Gardner, 'Sepoys and the Siege of Kut-al-Amara, December 1915- April 1916', *War in History*, 11 (2004), 307-326.

³⁴ F.J. Moberly, *The Campaign in Mesopotamia, 1914-1918*, History of the Great War Based on Official Documents, 4 vols (London: H.M.S.O, 1923-27).

of Charles Townshend (who declared his force to be insufficient to take Baghdad, and the communication lines to be too long), and especially Nixon's over-confidence in the ability of the Indian Expeditionary Force D (IEF D) to defeat Turkish troops. Barker identifies other causes that are not noted in modern histories of the campaign. He argues that the Indian Army was not capable of taking Baghdad because of decades of chronic under-investment in the military.³⁵ He also maintains that the structure of the Indian military was at fault, and that communication failures between Simla and London caused decisions to be made in India that would not have been approved had they been scrutinised in Whitehall.³⁶

Barker does not give any indication of his sources; however, it is clear that he relies heavily upon the conclusions of the Mesopotamia Commission, which published its findings in 1917. His points are almost verbatim those of the Commissioners, and are presented in almost exactly the same order.³⁷ Given the influence of Barker's history of the Mesopotamian campaign on some of the most popular histories of the First World War, it is no exaggeration to suggest that although the Mesopotamia Commission itself is little mentioned, its conclusions continue to shape the way the Mesopotamian campaign is understood by modern scholars of the war.

In many ways, it was not the siege of Kut itself that came to dominate the way Mesopotamia was represented in the British press, but the debate over how politicians had failed to see the impossibility of a successful advance to Baghdad in late 1915. Townshend and his men surrendered in April 1916, but the Mesopotamia Commission did not publish its report until the summer of 1917. This resulted in a protracted public debate over the Commission's proceedings, which continued for many months after the garrison at Kut had surrendered. Once the Commission's report was published, this debate was replaced by a new one over the punishment of those identified as negligent or blameworthy by the Commissioners. The siege of Kut and the Mesopotamia Commission dominated coverage of the campaign in Mesopotamia in the British press for many months after the events had taken place. As such, the

³⁵ Barker, p. 28.

³⁶ Barker, p. 79.

³⁷ See also, Ronald Millar, *Kut: The Death of an Army* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1969). Millar repeats almost all of Barker's points, in almost exactly the same order, suggesting that he too was influenced by the findings of the Mesopotamia Commission.

Commission has a central role in this thesis. Chapter Three is devoted to an analysis of the twelve volumes of the Commission's archives, held at the British Library.

Transcripts of the Mesopotamia Commission's interviews and documentary evidence submitted to the Commission reveal an emphasis on the role of prestige in the authorisation of the advance to Baghdad, and indeed the dispatch of troops to the Middle East in the first instance, which is under-acknowledged in histories of the campaign. Paul Davis's study *Ends and Means: The Mesopotamia Campaign and Commission* provides a thorough analysis of the Commission's findings. However, Davis's concern is with an assessment of the fairness and accuracy of the findings of the Mesopotamia Commission. In common with most histories of the campaign, Davis's study spends little time analysing the role of 'British prestige' in the authorisation of Townshend's advance to Baghdad in November, 1915.

In his article, 'The Dardanelles, Mecca and Kut: Prestige as a Factor in British Eastern Strategy, 1914-1916', David French makes a convincing case that the protection of British prestige in the East was an important consideration for those running Britain's Middle Eastern campaigns.³⁸ Chapter Three seeks to expand on French's definition of the concept of prestige and to apply it specifically to Mesopotamia. This chapter builds on Stuart Cohen's thesis that the dispatch of the forces to the Gulf was primarily motivated by 'propagandist' aims.³⁹ Rather than protecting the Admiralty's investment in the oil pipeline at Abadan or forming the 'vanguard of a programme of sustained expansion',⁴⁰ Cohen argues that the men of IEF D were primarily intended to impress the Arabs, and the Muslims of India.⁴¹ Through an analysis of evidence presented to the Mesopotamia Commission, contemporary parliamentary debates, media coverage and fictional representations of the siege of Kut, Chapter Three argues that fears over the protection of British prestige in the east were an important consideration for those running the campaign in Mesopotamia. It suggests that the apprehension they expressed over the consequences of the 'loss of prestige in the East' offers an insight into contemporary anxieties over Britain's role and standing on the world stage.

³⁸ David French, 'The Dardanelles, Mecca and Kut: Prestige as a Factor in British Eastern Strategy, 1914-1916', *War & Society* (1987), 53-55.

³⁹ S. A. Cohen, 'The Genesis of the British Campaign in Mesopotamia, 1914', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 12 (1976), 119-132.

⁴⁰ Cohen, p. 121.

⁴¹ Cohen, pp. 126-7.

Townshend's failed attempt on Baghdad had an enormous impact not only on the way in which the campaign was conducted, but also on the way in which the campaign in Mesopotamia was represented and perceived in Britain. In February 1916, the War Office in London took over the day-to-day running of the Mesopotamian Campaign, and Indian Expeditionary Force D became the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force (MEF). London's more direct control of the campaign brought with it greater funding, greater troop numbers and financial investment; these changes transformed Mesopotamia's infrastructure and landscape, and improved the quality of life of those serving in the region. Chapter Four examines the impact of the modern in a region defined for centuries in Britain by its association with myth and antiquity.

This period was also characterized by iconic victories and losses such as the capture of Baghdad in March 1917 and the death of the much-lauded Commander in Chief, General Sir Stanley Maude, later that year. Through an examination of the letters, diaries and memoirs of men and women serving in Mesopotamia, Chapter Four charts British perceptions of Mesopotamia as aeroplanes, cars, trains and cinemas began to replace camels and goat-skin floats in British descriptions of the region. It argues that a new set of mythologies – rooted in servicemen and women's wartime experiences – began to overshadow traditional images of the 'land between the rivers' in the final years of the First World War.

The Creation of Iraq

A wealth of historical research into the history of the Middle East has informed this work. Charles Tripp's *A History of Iraq* (2000) is a thorough account of the formation of the state of Iraq and of its history almost to the present day.⁴² The protection of Britain's Indian Empire was one of the primary concerns of those charged with planning Britain's policy in Mesopotamia throughout this period. Briton Cooper

⁴² The second edition of Tripp's book traces the history of Iraq until 2002. Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Busch's *Britain, India and the Arabs: 1914-1921* is, therefore, an important resource.⁴³ The centrality of India to Busch's understanding of the evolution of British policy in the Middle East influenced much of what follows.

My reading of the years between the Armistice and the coronation of Faisal in the summer of 1921 has been particularly informed by studies of the British Mandate. Peter Sluglett's authoritative *Britain in Iraq* remains the most comprehensive history of Anglo-Iraqi relations from the First World War to the end of the British Mandate in Iraq, in 1932. Sluglett's invaluable history is detailed and wide-ranging; his focus is very much on the post-war period.⁴⁴

Toby Dodge's *Inventing Iraq* also analyses the creation of the state of Iraq by Britain and looks predominantly at the British Mandate in Iraq. Dodge argues that the changing face of international politics, particularly the rising influence of Woodrow Wilson and the United States, combined with domestic pressures upon successive British governments to circumscribe their role in Iraq, ultimately causing them to fail in their mandated responsibilities towards the nascent state.⁴⁵ Dodge asserts that British military and civil authorities in Iraq approached their task ill-informed, and that their decisions were coloured by a traditional colonialist mindset that was ill-suited to the shape of the post-war world. Financial restrictions motivated by domestic unease in Britain along with the pressures of Iraqi nationalism, he maintains, ensured that rather than creating stable and self-sufficient institutions of state, Britain actively colluded with Iraqi nationalists to create the illusion of a state that would respect the rights of its many minorities and that was capable of defending its borders long before this was actually the case. For Dodge, Britain's desire to find the cheapest way of maintaining law and order led those charged with creating the state of Iraq to rely increasingly on the power of the Royal Air Force.

Peter Sluglett has identified the years between the Armistice and the return of Sir Percy Cox in 1920 to take up the role of High Commissioner as being of

⁴³ Briton Cooper Busch, *Britain, India, and the Arabs: 1914-1921* (Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 1971).

⁴⁴ Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country* [1976](London: I.B. Tauris, 2007); D.K. Fieldhouse's *Western Imperialism in the Middle East: 1914-58* contains a much shorter history of the same period. It is both less detailed and more accessible for its brevity. D.K. Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East: 1914-58* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2006)

⁴⁵ Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (London: Hurst and Co, 2003).

'inestimable importance'.⁴⁶ It was in these years, as pressure mounted on the government in Britain to reduce spending in Mesopotamia, that many important decisions were taken about the form of government to be installed in the nascent state and the ways in which order should be maintained. Dodge argues that the rebellion of 1920 was an important factor in turning British public opinion against the British Mandate.⁴⁷ Chapter Five, therefore, uses fictional and media accounts of the rebellion of 1920 to examine the longer-term impact of the First World War on British perceptions of Mesopotamia. It looks at the emerging debate about what role Britain should play in the future of Mesopotamia, and maps the ways in which wartime stereotypes of Arabs combined with pre-war ideas of Mesopotamia in these pivotal years.

Sources

This thesis draws on a wide variety of sources in an attempt to capture changing attitudes towards Mesopotamia in the years 1907-1921. A concerted effort was made to seek out a wide range of voices. This has been partly successful; because of the scarcity of sources, women's accounts remain a minority. I hope, though, that where they were available, I have been able to find and include them. In the years before the First World War, a minority of travellers to Mesopotamia were women. Only Gertrude Bell, Louisa Jebb and Mrs. Hume Griffith left published accounts of their journeys. During the war, women joined the armed forces as nurses or served their country in other capacities. A number of nurses' accounts in the form of diaries, memoirs and interviews inform the chapters that follow. Women like Emily Lorimer and Belle Cox went to Mesopotamia during the war to accompany their husbands. Lorimer went on to serve as editor of the British government publication, the *Basrah Times*. As Penelope Tuson points out, other women were certainly present, but their accounts, letters and diaries are not available to researchers.⁴⁸ Because of her position of influence and close connections (personal and professional) with those in power,

⁴⁶ Sluglett, p.22.

⁴⁷ Dodge, p. x and pp. 8-9.

⁴⁸ Penelope Tuson, *Playing the Game: Western Women in Arabia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), p. xii.

Gertrude Bell can be seen as a case apart. Bell was requested to travel first to Cairo to join David Hogarth's Arab Bureau, then on to Basra, and later Baghdad, to serve under Sir Percy Cox. Her geographical, ethnographic and linguistic knowledge of the Middle East was invaluable to Britain's war effort during the First World War and to its post-war decisions in relation to Mesopotamia.

Gertrude Bell was not the only 'Arabist' whose informal love of travel in the Middle East before the war transformed her into an essential asset during the British campaigns in the Middle East. Many men with interest or expertise in the Middle East also came to play an important role in the Mesopotamian campaign. They included the archaeologist Sir David Hogarth; the traveller and politician Sir Mark Sykes; the archaeologist Reginald Campbell Thompson; travellers such as St John Philby and the traveller and later politician Aubrey Herbert. T. E. Lawrence is probably the most famous of such figures, but aside from one controversial intervention where he formed part of a party of British political officers who attempted to buy the freedom of the Kut garrison in April 1916, Lawrence played little part in the Mesopotamian campaign. His role in shaping the post-war state and support for Faisal as the future monarch has been well-documented in histories of the period.

In this, as in many other instances, this thesis does not attempt to add to the rich existing history of the creation of the modern states of the Middle East. Instead, it seeks to shed light on changing British perceptions of one part of the region. In order to do this, a decision was made not to concentrate on the papers of many of the central figures in the campaign: those men whose accounts of Mesopotamia formed the backbone of British policy in the region, such as: Sir Percy Cox, Sir Arnold Wilson, Sir Winston Churchill, Sir Mark Sykes, to name but a few. The archives of such men have already formed the basis for many of the existing histories of the region and the war. Instead, I wished to see Mesopotamia through the eyes of those on the ground: the travellers, journalists, servicemen and women whose stories had not yet been told.

In order to trace changing ideas about Mesopotamia in Britain I looked at a range of contemporary publications. These articulate how individual journalists, novelists and others saw Mesopotamia, but also give a more general idea of how the region was represented in Britain throughout this period. By looking at a broad cross-section of publications – newspapers and periodicals from across the political

spectrum, with varied readerships – I have followed changing popular representation of Mesopotamia in these years. These were some of the most accessible representations of the region to all strata of the British public. Newspapers such as *The Times* or *John Bull* reached a vast readership which was simply interested in the news, rather than a far more self-selecting group who sought out information about the region because of a specific interest. Letters printed in newspapers and periodicals were an important resource because they offered the personal opinions on the campaign of men – and sometimes women – living in Britain.

In the pre-war period editions of the *Arabian Nights* stories were the predominant fictional representation of Mesopotamia, and particularly of the city of Baghdad. A number of fictional accounts of the Mesopotamian campaign were published during the war or took the war as their central theme. Where they could be located, this thesis considers a mixture of contemporary short stories and novels. These have been limited by what is available to boys' adventure stories and short stories of a military theme, and romances. This meant a repetition of themes and ideas. It is difficult, therefore, to draw broad conclusions about literary representations of Mesopotamia in this period.

Letters, memoirs, diaries and interviews made up the bulk of primary material pertaining to the war years. Though these sources refer to the same period of time, perhaps even the same event, they are each very different in nature. What servicemen and women wrote home was intended to be seen only by their recipients and the unavoidable censor. I have approached letters home as additional representations of Mesopotamia to British audiences: private and unguarded as some letters were, they were also intended for at least private circulation amongst friends and family. Some letters were even forwarded on to the regional or national press, and printed in the papers for a much wider readership. Though the men (I have seen no women's letters printed in this way) who wrote those letters had no idea that they would reach such a wide readership, the very presence of the censor (an oft-mentioned additional reader), the likelihood that several people would read each letter, and the time-lag between mails, meant that many letters read like reports home on Mesopotamia and its peoples, and very frequently included potted histories and descriptions of sights of architectural or archaeological significance. From the very

beginning of the war, many men and women also debated what Britain's role in Mesopotamia's future should or might have been.

The diaries of travellers, soldiers, officers and nurses were more private still. These sources were censored by no-one, perhaps even intended to be seen by no-one, though there is a pervading sense (expressed by many servicemen and women, particularly in the later years of the war) of the importance of marking their service in the First World War. Many were conscious of the importance of the war and wished their letters and diaries to act as a record of their service. Memoirs, often written many years after the war, are another facet of this process. They serve as a reminder that those who served in the Great War were aware of its importance, and wanted to preserve their memories of the war for posterity. These reflections are trickier sources: time erases many memories, and changing attitudes towards race and empire undoubtedly coloured how servicemen and women chose to recount their time in Mesopotamia. This is also the case with what service personnel revealed in interviews conducted mainly in the late 1960s and 1970s with the Imperial War Museum (IWM), or the BBC, now held in the IWM's sound archives.

It is difficult to know to what extent the perceptions of those who travelled, or were sent, to Mesopotamia were shared by the wider British public. The frequency with which the region was mentioned in the papers, or even the number of letters written to *The Times* or other publications about Mesopotamia give a limited indication of public interest, but they can only accurately gauge the level of interest of the press itself. Only rarely does one come across a letter written to someone in Mesopotamia from a loved one at home. In a letter dated 25 January 1917, Dorothy Bennett wrote to her husband, the Rev. Gordon Bennett, then a chaplain with the YMCA in Mesopotamia, in words one can imagine were repeated in letters to men on every front: 'I hope that you don't worry at all about me, I am perfectly well and my body is the only part of me that is in Coonoor [Conoor, Hyderabad], the rest of me is in Mesopotamia.'⁴⁹ It is impossible to say with any certainty how far the perceptions of those who wrote home were shared by others across the empire. But, as Dorothy Bennett's words suggest, the families of the men and women serving in Mesopotamia experienced the campaign through the accounts of their loved ones. We can conclude

⁴⁹ Cited in Private Papers of Rev. J G. Bennett, Imperial War Museum, London. Department of Documents: 7064 97/33/1. (Hereafter: IWM. Docs.)

that a crisis like the siege of Kut or a major victory such as the capture of Baghdad caught the attention of the nation, but it is much more difficult to make broad statements about generic British public opinion towards Mesopotamia for the entire period covered by this thesis. This thesis is not a history of Anglo-Mesopotamian political relations during this period, nor is it a history of the Mesopotamian campaign. Through a literary and historical reading of a broad range of sources, the chapters that follow chart changing British perceptions of Mesopotamia before, during and immediately after the First World War.

1

Mesopotamia in the British Imagination, 1907-1914

Mesopotamia was familiar to British audiences from the work of the archaeologist Austen Henry Layard, whose excavations of magnificent Assyrian artefacts had brought Mesopotamia's civilizations to life, and to Europe, half a century earlier. Travellers such as Gertrude Lowthian Bell (1868-1926), Sir Mark Sykes (1879-1919) and David Hogarth (1862-1927) went to Mesopotamia to see, or to dig for, the remnants of the ancient civilizations that had given the world some of its first empires and cities and whose people had invented the first cuneiform writing. They and their contemporaries went in search of the remnants of the Caliphs whose empire had stretched from Arabia to the gates of Europe and without whose foresight Greek learning might have been lost forever. They went to trace the journeys of Alexander the Great and to see the arch of Ctesiphon where the Emperor Julian, misled by omens, had turned his forces back, only to be killed in battle. They went, also, in search of the place where Scheherazade's tales of *A Thousand and One Nights* had been set, to walk through the cobbled streets, dotted with the glittering minarets that she describes. They went in search of the Baghdad where the Caliph Harun al-Rashid had walked in disguise as a commoner amongst his people. Finally, they went in search of the place where they could see for themselves where Jonah had landed and where Daniel had survived the Lions; the very place where the Garden of Eden had been, and where they could still visit Babylon.

This chapter examines how established cultural references such as these combined with contemporary events to shape British perceptions of Mesopotamia in the years 1907-1914. In the familiar tropes described above, Mesopotamia is defined by the achievements of its ancient civilizations, or by mythological or religious signifiers; the power of these long-entrenched preconceptions of Mesopotamia coloured the ways in which Mesopotamia was perceived or represented in Britain in these years. This chapter looks at how Britons dealt with the incongruence between the expectations of Mesopotamia such cultural

references encouraged, and the reality they encountered upon visiting the region in this period.

Contemporary Significance, Future Possibilities

Geopolitically, Mesopotamia was a part of the Ottoman Empire and, as such, it was included in perceptions of the Ottoman Empire as a whole. The years 1907-1914 were ones of turbulent change for the Ottoman government, the Sublime Porte. The most common reference to Mesopotamia, particularly in the earlier part of this period, related to discussions of the Baghdad Railway, which was to extend an existing rail link between Istanbul's Haider Pasha Station and Ismid, to Ankara. Eventually, the line was to link Istanbul to Baghdad.

With German financial assistance, work on the first extension from Ismid to Ankara had begun in 1888, but in 1902 the Sublime Porte granted the concession for laying new track from Ankara to Baghdad to a German company. This was widely seen as Germany's attempt to gain greater influence over a part of the world where, as Ottoman power waned, European powers vied for greater influence and trade opportunities. A 1902 report in *The Times* on the growing importance of the port of Basra urged British investors 'not [to] allow their Russian and German rivals to get ahead of them in a quarter of the globe which promises to be of very special importance at not distant date'.⁵⁰ Britain had for many years developed trade links and alliances with the shaikhs of the Persian Gulf; other European powers were seen to be encroaching upon British territory and taking advantage of British investment in the area. As the influential commentator Valentine Chirol asserted, any European power that sought to trade in Mesopotamia was building on peace and prosperity that had been established by Britain: 'each and all drawing upon the accumulated work of British pioneers'.⁵¹

After agreements had been reached over spheres of influence in the Middle East and North Africa with Britain's traditional rivals France, in 1904, and

⁵⁰'The Import Trade of Mesopotamia', *The Times*, 10 September 1902, p. 3.

⁵¹ Valentine Chirol, *The Middle East Question or Some Political Problems of Indian Defence* (London: John Murray, 1903), p. 244.

Russia, in 1907, British attention became focused on the rivalry with Germany. The Baghdad Railway brought Mesopotamia into the limelight as yet another potential seat of rivalry between these two European powers and, consequently, it was of contemporary political interest. Perhaps because of this, it was often used to contextualise Mesopotamia for British readers in accounts of the region published during these years.

Reflecting upon her decision to publish an account of her travels through Mesopotamia, the agricultural administrator Louisa Jebb, later Mrs. Wilkins, (1873-1929) described it as ‘a country which is also destined to become, as civilisation advances with the Baghdad Railway, the centre of future political interest’.⁵² Jebb’s travelogue *By Desert Ways to Baghdad* was an account of her journey through Asia Minor, Mesopotamia and Syria. Jebb travelled with her friend Victoria Buxton (later Mrs. De Bunsen), who remains anonymous in Louisa Jebb’s account of their travels. The two women met at Newnham College, Cambridge, where Jebb completed an agricultural diploma. Similarly, in his critique of *Tavernier’s Travels in Mesopotamia*, the archaeologist and Assyriologist Reginald Campbell Thompson contextualised the land for the modern reader by writing that it was ‘the country through which the Baghdad railway may pass’.⁵³ Thompson was to spend much of his career in Mesopotamia. After completing a degree in oriental languages at Cambridge, he worked at the British Museum before beginning the first of numerous field trips to excavate the remains of Nineveh, near Mosul in northern Mesopotamia, in 1904. At the outbreak of war Thompson became a political officer, and served in Mesopotamia from April 1915 until the end of the campaign.

Particularly before the Young Turk Revolution of 1908-9, the Ottoman Empire was seen and portrayed as the archetypal mismanaged and stagnant oriental despotism.⁵⁴ In an article titled ‘The Sultan and the Development of Mesopotamia’, *The Times* reported in 1907 that ‘mismanagement has become so proverbial in the Ottoman Empire that the very word “Turkish” connotes a muddle, so that in the rare instances in which they succeed the Turks receive but scanty credit. The world either

⁵² Louisa Jebb (Mrs. Roland Wilkins), *By Desert Ways to Baghdad* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908), p. 16.

⁵³ R. Campbell Thompson, *Tavernier’s Travels in Mesopotamia with Illustrations*, reprinted from *The Scottish Geographical Magazine* (1910), 141-148 (141).

⁵⁴ Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (London: Hurst, 2003).

ignores the anomaly, or with an incredulous smile watches humorously, waiting for the usual collapse'.⁵⁵

As part of this perceived ailing Ottoman Empire, Mesopotamia was described as a place with potential that had suffered from many years of Ottoman neglect. It was regarded as a region where chronic mismanagement had combined with the laziness and the lack of initiative believed to be characteristic of oriental fatalism, to create a land untouched by modernity, and where no progress had been made in millennia. The orientalist, traveller, and, later, political officer in the Indian Army, Ely Banister Soane, reflected in his travelogue, *To Mesopotamia and Kurdistan in Disguise*, that in Mesopotamia:

Bad government and continual insecurity of the country have done their best to restrain the people from any attempt at permanent buildings, the result being that every bazaar, mosque, and caravanserai is broken down and ruinous; in fact, Mosul strikes the stranger as a squalid city on the verge of disintegration.⁵⁶

In Soane's account, Mesopotamia, and the city of Mosul in particular, embodied the crumbling Ottoman Empire; its buildings – or lack thereof – were seen as symptoms of the prolonged illness that had afflicted the 'sick man of Europe'.

Such assessments of Mesopotamia were common. In an article on the Baghdad Railway for the *Contemporary Review*, Edwin Pears commented that Mesopotamia 'has been for centuries under the rule of a race which has never shown any power of developing industry or commerce'.⁵⁷ Pears was a barrister, publicist and historian best known for his writing on the Ottoman Empire and for his reporting of the atrocities against Christian Bulgarians in 1876. He concluded that 'while traversing the sites of the most ancient western civilizations [...] [The Baghdad Railway] will probably do as much to rescue the population from the barbarism of centuries'.⁵⁸ Here, Pears's appreciation for what he significantly terms 'ancient western civilizations' (my emphasis) is intermingled with his sympathy for the peoples who have had to live under Ottoman mismanagement. He presented the Baghdad Railway not as a business

⁵⁵ 'The Sultan and the Development of Mesopotamia', *The Times*, 17 September 1907, p. 5.

⁵⁶ E.B. Soane, *To Mesopotamia and Kurdistan in Disguise: With Historical Notices of the Kurdish Tribes and the Chaldeans of Kurdistan* (London: John Murray, 1912), p. 93.

⁵⁷ Edwin Pears, 'The Bagdad Railway', *The Contemporary Review*, 94 (1908), 570-591 (p. 570).

⁵⁸ Pears, p. 570.

venture, but as a project that had the power to ‘rescue’ the inhabitants of Mesopotamia from Ottoman neglect.

Implicit in these critiques is the sentiment that the British could manage it so much better, if only they were in charge. What frustrated these travellers and commentators most was the potential they saw in Mesopotamia; their belief in the success of past civilizations simply enhanced their unspoken, but evident, belief that if only Mesopotamia was better governed it would blossom once more. Although they did not overtly seek British influence in the region, the language of British commentators was imperial and their criticism of the Ottoman regime overt. Sir Mark Sykes, for example, compared Mesopotamia to regions in which Britain had already formally or informally annexed territory: South Africa, Egypt and the Sudan. He stressed the fertility of the land to his audience at the Royal Geographical Society in London:

Now the question which naturally presents itself to one’s mind is, What was the past of this strange and silent region? This is not the South African veldt with its miserable emptiness, or the Sahara with its dismal solitude; this land was once teeming with life and wealth, business and war.⁵⁹

The Mesopotamia Sykes described here was no wilderness but a land of potential, ripe for colonial development. He drew on the prosperity and power of Mesopotamia’s ancient past civilizations to assert that this was a place that could once again be made to prosper. Indeed, later in the article Sykes stated overtly that in parts of Mesopotamia ‘cultivation is possible, and, from the numerous ruins which stud their banks, I should imagine would prove profitable’.⁶⁰ Sykes’s rhetoric drew on Mesopotamia’s past success to look forward to the possibilities of its future – and the profits to be found therein.

Although the planned railway was one method through which British travellers and commentators saw potential for restoring Mesopotamia to the prosperity they identified with its ancient empires, there were others. One particularly evocative topic was a project initiated by the new Ottoman government to restore Mesopotamia’s irrigation system. A survey of irrigation was accordingly carried out in Mesopotamia by Sir William Willcocks between 1908 and 1910.

⁵⁹ Sykes, p. 242.

⁶⁰ Sykes, p. 240.

Willcocks outlined his work to the Royal Geographical Society in 1909; his paper, titled *The Garden of Eden and its Restoration*, was published in the *Geographical Journal* in 1912.⁶¹ Reflecting on the possibilities that such projects – both with European intervention at their heart – might create for Mesopotamia, Mrs. Hume Griffith noted in *Behind the Veil in Persia and Turkish Arabia*:

Irrigation in Mesopotamia will change the whole face of the country; vast stretches of desert will be transformed into a garden, ruined villages will be restored, a new kingdom may be born, and Babylon possibly rebuilt. Mosul, practically on the site of ancient Nineveh, will become easy of access from Europe by means of the Baghdad railway and the restored navigation of the Tigris. Its waste places may be filled with corn, and the city be crowned once more with some of its ancient glory.⁶²

Echoing Willcocks's reference to the Garden of Eden, Hume-Griffith could envisage a transformed Mesopotamia flowering once more. Unlike Edwin Pears's account, which focused on the benefits such projects might bring to the lives of Mesopotamia's inhabitants, Hume-Griffith sought to highlight the possibilities of the region for European travellers. Like Sir Mark Sykes, Mrs. Hume-Griffith could only assess Mesopotamia's potential with reference to her understanding of its past: words and phrases such as 'restored', which she repeats; 'rebuilt' and 'once more', draw the reader's attention to a past Mesopotamia that she wished to see restored. References to Babylon and to Mesopotamia's 'ancient glory' suggest that Hume-Griffith looked back to the Babylonian and Assyrian empires as the zenith of Mesopotamian civilization, and the register of her comments echoes the grandeur she associated with these ancient empires.

The complex and often contradictory British perceptions of Mesopotamia are well illustrated in Gertrude's Bell's 1911 book *Amurath to Amurath*.⁶³ A well-known traveller, archaeologist and, later, Oriental Secretary to the British High Commissioner in Baghdad, Bell would play an important role in the formation and administration of Iraq under the British Mandate. Bell dedicated her

⁶¹ Lecture later printed as Sir William Willcocks K.C.M.G., 'Mesopotamia: Past, Present, and Future', *The Geographical Journal*, 35 (1910), 1-15 ; Sir William Willcocks K.C.M.G., 'The Garden of Eden and its Restoration', *The Geographical Journal*, 40 (1912), 129-145; Prof. Sayce, John Jackson, L. W. King, F. R. Maunsell and William Willcocks, 'The Garden of Eden and its Restoration: Discussion' *The Geographical Journal*, 40 (1912), 145-148.

⁶² M. E. Hume-Griffith, *Behind the Veil in Persia and Turkish Arabia: An Account of An Englishwoman's Eight Years' Residence Amongst the Women of the East* (London: Seeley & Co, 1909), p. viii.

⁶³ Gertrude Lowthian Bell, *Amurath to Amurath* [1911] (London: Macmillan and Co, 1924).

narrative of a journey in 1909 through Asia Minor, Syria and Mesopotamia to the diplomat and recently retired proconsul of Egypt, Lord Cromer (1841-1917). Addressing Cromer, she explained her choice: 'you, with your profound experience of the East, have learnt to reckon with the unbroken continuity of its history'.⁶⁴ For Bell, the east was a place of wonder. It was a place of adventure and a place to seek knowledge, a place in which one could experience a freedom impossible to find in Britain, but it was also a place that was crying out for the benefits of western civilization, justice and liberty. Although Bell did not argue for greater British involvement in Mesopotamia, her desire to export western methods of fair and effective government is evident, and her dedication of *Amurath to Amurath* to Lord Cromer is significant.

Cromer's name was almost synonymous with a benevolent British Empire. Upon his death in 1917, *The Times* reproduced the debate in the House of Lords. In one of a series of tributes to the Earl of Cromer paid by his colleagues in what Lord Curzon (1859-1925), former Viceroy of India, termed a 'house of mourning',⁶⁵ the Marquess of Crewe (1858-1945), secretary of state for India 1910-1915, reflected that Cromer 'was one of those men who earned the good will of alien races, not so much by a desire to confer on them political institutions resembling our own, as by continually caring for their material prosperity and advance in general civilization. He did a great work in Egypt'.⁶⁶ In the same debate, Curzon concluded that Cromer's achievements in Egypt would 'remain his imperishable monument'.⁶⁷

Credited with the stability and efficiency of Britain's informal empire in Egypt, Cromer was a dedicated imperialist with very distinct views on Islam, the modern 'Oriental mind' and its deficiencies when compared to that of the European. In his book *Modern Egypt*, Cromer described the 'Oriental mind':

The reticence of Orientals when speaking to anyone in authority; their tendency to agree with anyone to whom they may be talking; the want of mental symmetry and precision, which is the chief distinguishing feature between the illogical and picturesque East and the logical West, and which lends such peculiar interest to the study of Eastern life and politics; the fact that religion enters to a greater extent than in Europe into the social life and laws and customs of the people; and the further fact that the European and the

⁶⁴ Bell, *Amurath to Amurath*, p. vi.

⁶⁵ Lord Curzon, 'House of Lords', *The Times*, 8 February 1917, p. 10.

⁶⁶ 'House of Lords', *The Times*, 8 February 1917, p. 10.

⁶⁷ 'House of Lords', *The Times*, 8 February 1917, p. 10.

Oriental reasoning from the same premises, will often arrive at diametrically opposed conclusions – all these circumstances place the European at a great disadvantage when he attempts to gauge Eastern opinion.⁶⁸

Lord Cromer was a man who believed that, after many years in the East, he understood the Oriental mind (as much as any westerner could), and who had judged it and found it wanting. The ‘Oriental’ was lacking in ‘mental symmetry’; ultimately ‘illogical and picturesque’ like ‘the East’ and ‘diametrically opposed’ to ‘the logical West.’ Nevertheless, for Gertrude Bell only Lord Cromer, with his ‘profound experience’ and understanding of ‘the East’ and its peoples, could best understand the sentiments she wished to express.⁶⁹

Bell explained that her dedication to Cromer was in recognition of his role in improving the lives of the Egyptians:

Remembering that the return of prosperity to the people of the Near East began with your administration in Egypt, you will understand why I should have ventured to offer it, with respectful admiration, to you.⁷⁰

In dedicating her book to this archetypal imperialist, Gertrude Bell was seeking colonial intervention in a land crying out for change but, in her view, unable to achieve it without help. She regarded the people of Mesopotamia themselves as fundamentally unable to understand the concepts of freedom and liberty that they so needed. On her travels she questioned the Mesopotamians she met about the value of liberty and reflected on their inability to understand or make use of the concept. She described one such conversation on the merits of democratic government with an Arab:

Murawwah drew himself up on his hungry mare. [...] “...We will not bow our heads to any government. To the Arabs belongs command.” And he slashed his tamarisk switch as he proclaimed the liberties of the wilderness, the right of feud, the right of raid, the right of revenge - the only liberty the desert knows.⁷¹

The Arab Bell describes in this passage is a wild creature, untameable and only able to work within his own framework of values. Bell indicates Murawwah’s misplaced pride by drawing attention to the ‘hungry mare’ upon which he makes a physical demonstration of his power: ‘he slashed his tamarisk switch’. Bell tells us that this physical and violent act proclaims ‘the only liberty the desert knows’. Here she

⁶⁸ Evelyn Baring, Earl of Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, 2 vols. (London: MacMillan, 1908), vol. 1, pp. 7-8.

⁶⁹ Bell, *Amurath*, p. vii.

⁷⁰ Bell, *Amurath*, p. ix.

⁷¹ Bell, *Amurath*, p. 90.

conflates Murawwah with the vast, empty, homogeneous and barren space of the desert, itself a defining feature of Arabia in the western imagination. Moreover in constructing his proclamation as a physical act rather than a vocalised utterance, Bell suggested that Murawwah was simply incapable of articulating a sophisticated position, in the same way as he was unable to understand the benefits of good government and of liberty, here posited as alien, western concepts in opposition to the violence of the east.

Like other travellers, Bell often reflected on the past fertility and prosperity of the Mesopotamian landscape and lamented its uncultivated state, which she too attributed to a lack of investment and good government: the traits of the Oriental Despotism the Ottoman Empire was understood to be.

The majestic presence of the river in the midst of uncultivated lands, which, with the help of its waters, would need so little labour to make them productive, takes a singular hold on the imagination. I do not believe that the east bank has always been so thinly peopled, and though the present condition may date from very early times, it is probable that there was once a continuous belt of villages by the stream, their sites being still marked by mounds.⁷²

Bell's admiration for Mesopotamia and her frustration with its contemporary state are expressed in equal measure in this passage. Like Sir Mark Sykes's assessment of the possibilities in Mesopotamia's future, in this description, Mesopotamia's natural attributes (its 'majestic' river and 'uncultivated lands') are combined with its past prosperity - here symbolised by the 'continuous belt of villages' that no longer exists - as proof of the region's future potential. Bell's use of the word 'uncultivated' and her assertion that it 'would need so little labour' makes clear her frustration that such potential had not been fulfilled. Like Sykes, she dismissed Mesopotamia's contemporary state, looking backwards to its past civilizations, and forward towards a more prosperous future, based on a more direct British involvement.

However, Bell's attitudes did not fit entirely with the European imperial project. Despite her affinity with Cromer, she stated unequivocally that 'the people of the West can conquer but they can never hold Asia, no, not when they go out under the banners of Alexander himself.'⁷³ Bell, like so many others, looked to the change promised by the Young Turks for hope for the future of Mesopotamia. The Young Turk

⁷² Bell, *Amurath*, p. 47.

⁷³ Bell, *Amurath*, p. 228.

Revolution was led by the Committee for Union and Progress in 1908; it called for, and succeeded in reinstating, the Ottoman Constitution of 1876. When in July 1908 the 'Oriental Despot' Abdulhammid II announced the restoration of the Ottoman constitution, British observers seemed to hold their breath in anticipation. His deposition in 1909, and the beginning of the reign of Mehmet V, was greeted with hope, and the new constitution, which gave real power to the parliament, was seen as the first real step towards liberty and democracy in the decaying Ottoman Empire.

As she travelled, Bell asked many of those she encountered what their hopes were for the future and concluded that 'the chief bar to progress was the political fatalism of the people themselves'.⁷⁴ 'Profoundly discouraged', she argued that 'European Turkey is the head and brains of the empire, and that if the difficult task of reform is to be carried out in Asia it can only be done from Western Turkey'.⁷⁵ It follows from her characterisation of the Arab as savage and incapable of acquiring the products of western learning that only a regime in *European* Turkey held any hope for Mesopotamia.

The new regime to which Bell referred was formed after The Young Turk Revolution; its promised aims were greeted with great enthusiasm in the British press. The author of an anonymous article in *Blackwood's Magazine* declared that 'Turkey, the effete, the crumbling empire, has committed herself to a revolution, possibly the most amazing, because it was the least expected, in the history of mankind'.⁷⁶ Here, the Young Turks were portrayed as a group of aspirational Ottomans who had gathered in European capitals, immersed in European culture and civilization, to plot the demise of the authoritarian regime of the Sultan. In Paris, the author explained, the Young Turks 'came under the influences of modern progress; were able to judge of the qualifications for modern statecraft; and what is more important, to realise the full measure of the canker at the heart of their own country'.⁷⁷ For him/her, the Young Turks were only able to see the Sultan for what he truly was, after they had come under the influence of 'modern progress', here a synonym for European civilization.

Representations of the Young Turk Revolution were filled with hope that the new regime might bring change in the Ottoman Empire as a whole, a

⁷⁴ Bell, *Amurath*, pp. 186-7.

⁷⁵ Bell, *Amurath*, p. 73.

⁷⁶ 'The Story of the Young Turks', *Blackwood's Magazine*, January 1909, p.1-12 (p. 1).

⁷⁷ 'The Story of the Young Turks', p. 3.

possibility that Oriental Despotism, and its consequent stagnation, might soon be brought to an end. However, many British travellers believed that such changes would be slow to take effect in Mesopotamia itself. Gertrude Bell, for example, pointed out that while change had certainly taken place in Constantinople, its consequences would be slow to manifest themselves in Mesopotamia. As change rocked the capital, Bell made her way across the desert almost entirely isolated from the revolution. When news trickled through to the Mesopotamian provinces, Bell reflected that ‘in Mosul not a voice was raised against the second triumph of the new order. With the entire lack of initiative which characterizes the Asiatic provinces, men resigned themselves to a decree of Fate which was substantially backed by the army’.⁷⁸ Bell’s description homogenised the peoples not only of Mosul, but of Asia. She described a listless population that took no interest in the revolution in Constantinople.

However, the Oriental fatalism she attributed to the people of Mosul does not tally with historical accounts of reactions to the Young Turk Revolution and its aftermath in the Mesopotamian *vilayets*. Charles Tripp maintains that the ‘Young Turk revolution of 1908 [...] allowed many of the hitherto suppressed currents of political opinion within the three Mesopotamian provinces to find public expression’.⁷⁹ He describes the period immediately following the revolution as one of defined by active ‘political engagement of growing numbers in Mosul, Baghdad and Basra’.⁸⁰ But such political engagement is nowhere to be found in the accounts examined here; in neither Mesopotamia’s cities nor its towns did these British travellers and journalists report any engagement with the revolution.

Mesopotamia as a Relic of its Own Past

For the majority of British people who did not travel to Mesopotamia itself, and indeed for those who did, the first encounter with the country was likely to have been in Scheherazade’s tales. The Caliph Harun al-Rashid is one of the many characters whose stories she traces, but the fascination with the Abbasid caliphate was

⁷⁸ Bell, *Amurath*, p. 252

⁷⁹ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.22.

⁸⁰ Tripp, p. 22.

by no means restricted to the *Arabian Nights* stories. In the accounts examined here, Baghdad was identified primarily as the city of the Caliphs. The Abbasid Caliphate, which dated roughly from around 750 AD until the Mongols sacked the Baghdad in 1258, is considered the golden age of the Muslim Empire. Under the Abbasid Dynasty the capital of the empire was moved from Damascus to Baghdad (except for a short period under al-Mu'tasim (833-42), when the capital was Samarra in the North of Iraq). In the pages of the *Arabian Nights* stories the east in general, and Baghdad in particular, was depicted as a mystified, exotic place. Illustrations, like these by Edmund Dulac from 1911, were often very detailed and full of intense colour:

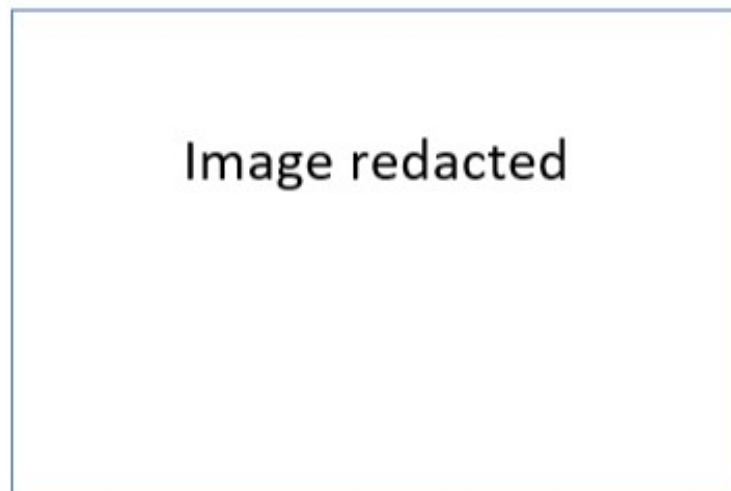


Figure 3. An illustration of the enchanted palace of a cursed prince from: 'The Fisherman and the Genie' in The Magic Horse and Other Stories from the Arabian Nights, retold by Laurence Housman, with drawings by Edmund Dulac (1911)

Others, like the illustrations in this 1914 edition, were framed in gold. The books themselves seem to convey the luxury and opulence of the court to their readers:

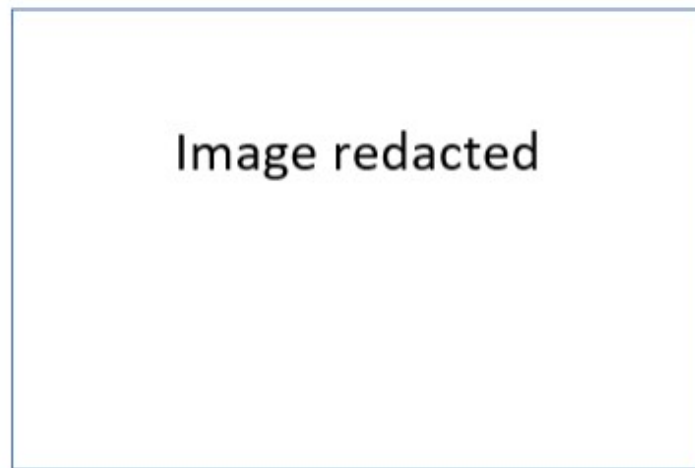


Figure 4. The view from the bridge in Baghdad on which Hassan meets the Sultan, Harun al-Rashid from: 'Hassan the Sleeper' in Sinbad the Sailor and Other Stories from the Arabian Nights, Illustrated by Edmund Dulac (1914)

It would be overly simplistic to argue that the images of the east and of Baghdad in these tales were taken to be descriptions of contemporary Baghdad. Yet the frequency with which the Abbasid Caliphate was invoked in descriptions of Mesopotamia, and of Baghdad in particular, suggests that the imagery of Abbasid glory had merged with the mystique of the *Arabian Nights*, and remained the abiding image of the city for many British travellers and commentators in the early twentieth century.

David Fraser was a correspondent for *The Times* and *The Times of India* and ‘an authority of no mean weight on the topics of western Asia generally’.⁸¹ In concluding his account of his journey through Mesopotamia, he reflected:

Our long and fascinating kelek voyage is over at last, and we float past the gilded dome and minarets of the mosque at Kasamin, between groves of dates, palms, and orange-trees, down to Baghdad itself, with its
“Shrines of fretted gold,
High walled gardens, green and old”.⁸²

Ending his narrative with this romantic image of the east, complete with glittering minarets and ‘shrines of fretted gold’, David Fraser’s description of Mesopotamia echoed the illustrations of the *Arabian Nights* stories. Fraser’s quotation comes from Alfred Lord Tennyson’s 1830 poem *Recollections of the Arabian Nights*. Tennyson’s poem describes a boat journey during which the narrator makes his way to Baghdad and through its magical streets. The poem is set at Baghdad’s zenith: ‘the golden prime/ of good Haroun Alraschid’.⁸³ Fraser’s reference to these lines, which serve as the refrain for each of Tennyson’s stanzas, is testimony to the continuing prominence of these opulent images of Abbasid Baghdad almost a century after the publication of Tennyson’s verse.

With such rich visions of Mesopotamia’s past, it is little wonder that the reality of Mesopotamian life often paled in comparison in the travelogues considered here. Bell and her fellow travellers often compared the everyday lives of contemporary Mesopotamians with the grandeur they associated with its history, and inevitably found its present wanting. Many were dismayed to find what they perceived as barbarity in a land whose inhabitants ‘were once civilised’.⁸⁴ Bell described Mesopotamia as a land that had lost all traces of its former prosperity:

It was a very barren world, scarred with the traces of former cultivation, *and all the more* poverty stricken and desolate because it had once been rich and peopled; flat, too, an interminable, featureless expanse from which the *glory had departed*.⁸⁵

⁸¹ ‘Review: Travels in South-West Asia: Persia and Turkey’, *The Geographical Journal*, 37 (1911), 436 (p. 436).

⁸² David Fraser, ‘Afloat on the Tigris’, *Fortnightly Review*, 85 (1909), 271-281 (p. 281).

⁸³ Alfred Tennyson, *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical by Alfred Tennyson* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1830), p. 48.

⁸⁴ Pears, p. 570.

⁸⁵ Bell, *Amurath*, p. 167. My emphasis.

Bell's language is evocative of the violence that she believed years of neglect had done to Mesopotamia's once-fertile and prosperous provinces. In a continuation of the importance she placed throughout her account on Mesopotamia's history, Bell stressed that the poverty and starkness of contemporary Mesopotamia was made 'all the more' desolate because it had once been great. Louisa Jebb also reflected on the past glories of Mesopotamia, and on its contemporary desolation:

The Eastern gate of heaven was unbarred; Shamas, the sun-god of Babylonia, flamed forth and stepped upon the mount of sunrise at the edge of the world. As he had poured the light of heaven upon the luxuriant gardens and fertile cornlands of the Babylonians, so was he pouring it upon the same spot, now an arid and deserted wilderness.⁸⁶

Jebb's language and imagery echoed the decline she perceived in Mesopotamia's fortunes. In her description of Babylonian Mesopotamia, her language evoked a world of plenty: words such as 'flamed', 'sunrise' and 'light' filled her imagery with golden light; this combined with her descriptions of 'luxuriant gardens' and the fertility of the Babylonian landscape she described to evoke a world of plenty, aptly ruled over by 'Shamas' – the sun god. In contrast, her vision of contemporary Mesopotamia was bare, like the landscape she described; 'an arid and deserted wilderness' stood in stark contrast to Babylonia's former glory. These travellers were shocked and dismayed by what they saw as the decay of one of the greatest civilizations that the world had ever seen. How, they asked over and over again, how could this once great race have fallen so low?

Only five years before Bell published *Amurath to Amurath*, her friend, the traveller and archaeologist David Hogarth, had attempted to explain how it was that the civilizations that had once stunned the world with their sophistication had fallen into ruin. For Hogarth, to enter Mesopotamia was 'to pass through the shadow of what had been, to feel that the actual is *over-weighted by too great a burden of history*'.⁸⁷ The modern-day peoples of Mesopotamia lived quite literally in the shadow of the civilizations that Hogarth and his contemporaries had travelled to encounter. Hogarth argued that people who were directly descended from some of the greatest civilizations led pitiful and backward lives because their races had spent their energies

⁸⁶ Jebb, p. 245.

⁸⁷ D.G. Hogarth, 'The Eastern Mind', *Monthly Review* 15 (1904), 113-122 (p. 122). My emphasis.

in another era, and simply had no more to give. He believed that the contemporary populations of ‘the plains of India, Mesopotamia, Syria, and Egypt, and the hills of Greece, Italy or Spain’ were afflicted by a crippling ‘Oriental Fatalism’, and asserted that ‘their peoples have been, each in turn, the protagonists of human progress, and advanced all the race a little way on the common road; but it is many centuries since the last fell out of the leading place’.⁸⁸ Hogarth concluded that ‘the more strenuous the ancient life, the greater the exhaustion and the more obvious the fatalistic habit now’.⁸⁹ In this analysis, Hogarth offered a view of contemporary Mesopotamia that was informed not by his familiarity with the modern-day region, but by his understanding of its past civilizations. His explanation of ‘Oriental Fatalism’ reflected the widely held belief in the contemporary stagnation of Mesopotamian culture, and his nostalgia for the grandeur he associated with Mesopotamia’s history rendered the present reality of the lives of Mesopotamians a disappointment to him.

At the heart of Hogarth’s understanding of the people of the east was his belief in the idea of progress. This secular and linear idea of time conceived of different peoples as ‘irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of Time, some upstream, others downstream. Civilization, evolution, development, acculturation, modernization [...] are all terms whose conceptual content derived, in ways that can be specified, from evolutionary Time’.⁹⁰ But what is striking about Hogarth’s description of Mesopotamia’s peoples is that they were not simply considered to be backward in their development, as such a hierarchy might suggest; Hogarth’s analogy makes it clear that they had lost a lead they had once had. Ancient Mesopotamians had given Mesopotamian civilization a head start, but it had fallen behind, allowing other civilizations to overtake it.

References to the former greatness of Mesopotamia abound in travel narratives and other descriptions of the land; in each case, this former glory is contrasted unfavourably with the barbarism or backwardness of its contemporary people and culture. Louisa Jebb described the inhabitants of Baghdad at prayer:

⁸⁸ Hogarth, p. 122.

⁸⁹ Hogarth, p. 122.

⁹⁰ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 17.

Thus prayed the dwellers of the city four thousand years ago. And with the same light with which you lit the pomp and splendour of the works of their time, you light the decay and ruin and hideous desolation of the present.⁹¹

Invoking God in what she understood as primarily a biblical land, in this passage Jebb drew attention to the decline the city of Baghdad had suffered. She emphasised the unchanging elements of Mesopotamian life to draw the reader's attention to the very pronounced change that had come over the city itself. Although, the 'same light' shines on the unchanging ritual of prayer in her description, the light that had fallen on 'the pomp and splendour' now fell on the 'decay and ruin and hideous desolation of the present'. Sykes was also struck by the contrast between the reality of Mesopotamia and its glorious past; his paper described a land once rich with culture and civilization, but now a shadow of its former self:

If we peer back into the darkest antiquity, we find a land densely peopled by a cultured race; mighty mounds still mark with permanence their fleeting sojourn, huge canals and dykes, some containing water even now, remain to show us where man once was. [...] When Alexander appropriated the Persian Empire, the modern Jazirah contained many wealthy cities [...]. A large agricultural population flourished on the banks of the rivers to which I have just drawn attention.⁹²

For Sykes too, Mesopotamia was a place of past grandeur that had been allowed, over the centuries, to deteriorate. Sykes's description stressed the distance between contemporary Mesopotamia and its former prosperity: to see it, one was obliged to 'peer back into the darkest antiquity'. Once again, Sykes looked into Mesopotamia's past to a 'cultured', 'wealthy' land filled with busy, productive people.

Where these travellers did not conceive of Mesopotamia as a place in a state of decline, they understood it as a place where time had stood still. This combined with their emphasis on the importance of Mesopotamia's history to render the region a frozen image of its own history in their descriptions: a relic of its own past. In her preface to *Amurath to Amurath*, Bell insisted that in the lands through which she had travelled:

Conqueror follows upon the heels of conqueror, nations are overthrown and cities topple down into dust, but the conditions of existence are *unaltered and*

⁹¹ Jebb, *By Desert Ways to Baghdad*, p. 251

⁹² Sykes, pp. 242-244.

*irresistibly they fashion the age in the likeness of the old. 'Amurath an Amurath succeeds' and the tale is told again.*⁹³

Bell's emphasis on an unbroken repetition of history goes to the heart of the British understanding of Mesopotamia in this period. For the people of Mesopotamia nothing had nor could change: each new regime and each new chapter was simply a repetition of what had come before.

Bell's quotation, which is also the title of her book, is taken from Shakespeare's *King Henry IV, Part II* and evokes the bloody legend of the Ottomans in Elizabethan England. Upon his accession to the throne, Prince Harry emerges to reassure his brothers that he would not become a tyrant. He states:

Brothers you mix your sadness with some fear
This is the *English* not the *Turkish* court,
Not Amurath an Amurath succeeds,
But Harry, Harry,⁹⁴

Karl Wentersdorf argues that Shakespeare is alluding to the Ottoman Sultan Murad III, who ruled the Empire from 1574-95 and was known in England as Amurath. Wentersdorf maintains that the Ottomans were seen as ruthless and bloody tyrants in Elizabethan England. He notes that Amurath was infamous because immediately upon his accession he ordered the murder of his five brothers.⁹⁵

Bell's use of the Anglicisation of the name Murad, Amurath, is all the more significant because she was an accomplished linguist. Indeed, Bell used her familiarity with oriental languages to assert her authority as an expert in the region throughout the text that follows this preface. Although she undoubtedly humanised the people of Mesopotamia, Bell also stressed the exoticism of her travels for her readers. One way in which she did this was to incorporate the invocations to God that form a part of the Arabic speech pattern. These were reproduced at regular intervals, reminding the reader of the difference of her interlocutors: "True, true," said the Arab beside us. "Wallah, so it is".⁹⁶ Similarly, Bell employed her own frequent use of these turns-of-phrase to signal her knowledge of the region, its languages and customs to

⁹³ Bell, *Amurath*, p. vii. My emphasis.

⁹⁴ William Shakespeare, *King Henry IV, Part II*, Act V. 2. 46-9 in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare with Annotations and a General Introduction by Sidney Lee*, vol 24 (London: George G. Harrop & Co., 1908).

⁹⁵ Karl. P. Wentersdorf, 'On "Momtanish Inhumanity" in *Sir Thomas More*', *Studies in Philology*, 103 (2006), 178-185.

⁹⁶ Bell, *Amurath*, p. 65.

her readers, reproducing these phonetically to remind us that she was conversing fluently in a foreign, oriental tongue.

Bell's use of the anglicised name, Amurath, was a statement of her knowledge of the history and culture of the lands that she went on to describe. In the contemporary political climate, Bell's emphasis on the unbroken and unbreakable cycle of repetition, which for her constituted the history of the Ottoman Empire and its peoples, was reflected in her reference to the many sultans called Murad. Amurath or Murad was the name of no fewer than five Ottoman sultans who reigned between 1359 and 1876. They included Murad IV who re-conquered Baghdad after a long siege, which ended in the massacre of the garrison and of the citizens of the city within. For Bell, Mesopotamia was trapped in an endless cycle of repetition that its people were incapable of breaking.

Bell's preface was the most evocative of the numerous ways in which the descriptions of many British travellers and journalists of this period demonstrated their perception of Mesopotamia as a place frozen at an early or primitive stage of its development. As they travelled around Mesopotamia, travellers often noted that practices which they associated with Mesopotamia's ancient civilizations – those whose history had drawn them to Mesopotamia and fuelled their interest in the region – were still in use in contemporary Mesopotamian life. This led British commentators to conclude that the people of Mesopotamia had simply not 'evolved' or 'progressed' since. In one example, Bell noted:

The fires under the troughs of molten bitumen sent up their black smoke columns between the trees; half-naked Arabs fed the flames with the same bitumen, and the Euphrates bore along the product of their labours as it had done for the Babylonians before them. So it must have looked, this strange factory under the palm-trees, for the last 5,000 years, and all the generations of Hit have not altered by a shade the processes taught them by their first forefathers.⁹⁷

In Bell's description, modern Mesopotamians had not 'progressed' in any way since the advances of 'their forefathers'. Bell's image of the 'half-naked Arabs' evokes for her audience the stereotypes of the barbarous 'other', and her emphasis upon the unchanging elements in Mesopotamian life is reflected in her reference to the river Euphrates. For her audience, the Euphrates had flowed since God had created Heaven

⁹⁷ Bell, *Amurath*, p. 108

and Earth; Bell describes the timeless river as carrying its load in the early twentieth century in exactly the same way as it had done for the Babylonians thousands of years earlier. Her description underlines the inertia that she identified with Mesopotamia: ‘for the last 5,000 years all the generations of Hit have not altered by a shade the processes taught them by their first forefathers’.

Bell was looking at a contemporary scene, but imagined that she could see, in the contemporary lives of Mesopotamians, how the Babylonians had lived five millennia before. Indeed, it was this point that made the biggest impression on one of Bell’s reviewers. Writing for the *English Review*, the anonymous reviewer described Hit as the place:

Where the primitive furnaces of asphalt-burners are still smoking and stinking as they smoked undoubtedly in the days of Herodotus, and stank to produce the tributes to Bitumed exacted by Thothmes III.⁹⁸

That a relatively short review of a long book should have picked up particularly on this scene suggests that it made an impression on Bell’s readers. It exemplified, for the reviewer, the primitivism Bell had identified with Mesopotamia. In ‘the finest book of Eastern travel produced in England’, Bell had described a country where one could look upon a contemporary scene and see how a civilization had lived thousands of years earlier.⁹⁹ For Bell, and for at least some of those who read her work, Mesopotamia functioned as a living exhibit of its own past.

Similarly, Mark Sykes dwelt upon Mesopotamia’s glorious history, devaluing its present:

The empire of Alexander fades into Parthian and Seleucid dominion, the empires of the Macedonians are swallowed up into that of the great republic, the dominion of the Parthians is changed to that of the Sassanian Persians, the Roman Empire of Augustus resolves itself into that of Constantine, and eventually the two ever-clashing forces of antiquity, Byzantium and Persis, are suddenly merged into one rule under the khalifs; yet through all these centuries and all these vicissitudes, read it as we will, the Jazirah seems to be ever the same.¹⁰⁰

Sykes’s emphasis on the seemingly unending stream of empires while ‘the Jazirah seems to be ever the same’ echoed Bell’s statement that “‘Amurath an Amurath succeeds” and the tale is told again’: both evoked a land trapped in an endlessly

⁹⁸ ‘Amurath to Amurath’, *English Review* 3 (1911), 751-753 (p. 752).

⁹⁹ *English Review*, p. 751.

¹⁰⁰ Sykes, p. 244.

repetitive cycle – one that, consequently, had not progressed for many centuries. British commentators were surprised to encounter even the most basic signs of ‘civilization’ or ‘progress’. Upon finding a river crossing, Bell commented:

To my amazement it was provided with a practicable bridge of boats, by which we crossed, glorifying the works of man, it was the first, and I may add the only bridge over the Euphrates that I was privileged to see.¹⁰¹

The fact that Bell had seen no other such bridges suggests that they were indeed rare. But her shock at this most basic of conveniences was not simply a reflection of her surprise at seeing a rarity; it was also a reflection of the entrenchment of her understanding of Mesopotamia as an unchanging place.

These accounts suggest that British commentators on Mesopotamia in the years that preceded the First World War placed far more emphasis upon its past than either on its present or its future. Even when they speculated upon the region’s future potential, they did so with reference to the prosperity they associated with its ancient civilizations. These accounts describe a complex denial of co-evalness, in Johannes Fabian’s terms: not merely an assertion of a European or British advanced state of evolution, but regret at a civilization that had declined.¹⁰² In these accounts, Mesopotamia and its inhabitants were not merely ‘backward’; they had, in Hogarth’s words, fallen ‘out of the leading place’.¹⁰³ It is this fall from grace – the distance between the prosperity these travellers associated with an older Mesopotamia and the reality of its impoverished towns and people – that defined their representations of the region and its inhabitants in this period.

Appropriating Mesopotamia

As Geoffrey Nash has noted in relation to nineteenth-century British travel to the Middle East, part of the attraction of travel to the east was that ‘Middle-Eastern societies and peoples were at once exotic, primitive and stationary, and

¹⁰¹ Bell, *Amurath*, p. 167.

¹⁰² Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

¹⁰³ Hogarth, p. 122.

connected to the Western imperialist nations as their originals'.¹⁰⁴ However, the travelogues examined here took this affinity one step further. In the writing of these travellers, the elements of Mesopotamia's history that were seen to be the progenitors of a western civilization were understood exclusively to be the early part of a western, rather than an eastern or Mesopotamian, cultural heritage. Not merely an 'affinity' or a shared heritage, but an appropriation of what they valued in Mesopotamian culture can be seen in the accounts that follow.

In order to cope with the incongruence between the Mesopotamia of the British imagination and the reality of contemporary Mesopotamia, a two-fold process of acquisition operated. Mesopotamia's historical or archaeological artefacts were acquired for, and transported to, Europe for display and consumption in European cultural and educational institutions. Less transportable elements of Mesopotamia's history and culture were also appropriated by Europe. Those elements of its history and culture that were seen to be the progenitors of a western civilization were appropriated to a western discourse, which native peoples were perceived to be incapable of engaging with or understanding the significance of. This can be seen as part of the process of defining the Orient for western consumption that Edward Said identifies in *Orientalism* (1978).

Said argues that in order to cope with the threat posed by the Orient, the Occident created, through its academic institutions, an Orient that was seen as primarily an object of research, and secondarily as an object of ridicule and disdain. Such a mindset of cataloguing was certainly part of British attitudes towards Mesopotamia in the early twentieth century. This was illustrated in definitions of Mesopotamia's people, their character and culture that can be seen in these accounts. Sykes devoted the majority of his paper to the definition of 'the Arab' or 'the Kurd':

The pure Arab is a very strange being indeed. His mind is complex and cultured; there is no Arab of pure race to whom rhetoric, subtle argument, poetry, and histrionism do not appeal; he is able to take a broad view of matters, or to discuss reasonably on any subject within the range of his experience, and yet, when dealing with any material object, he seems almost a perverse dunderheaded clown. Work he loathes and abhors; his argumentative capacity provides him with an excuse; he announces that work is dishonourable and

¹⁰⁴ Geoffrey Nash, 'Politics, Aesthetics and Quest in British Travel Writing on the Middle East', in *Travel Writing in the Nineteenth Century: Filling the Blank Spaces*, ed. by Tim Youngs (London: Anthem Press, 2006), pp. 55-70 (p. 57).

degrading. Consequently he avoids the point that he is incompetent, lazy, and incapable, and says that cultivating the ground, pitching a tent in a reasonable way, doctoring a horse, cooking food, building a house, are contemptible employments beneath the dignity of man, and leaves the baffled western in the ridiculous position of a worthy but rather underbred person who has no finer instincts.¹⁰⁵

Sykes's definition of 'the pure Arab' is authoritative. Delivered in a long list, it would have asserted the breadth of Sykes's expertise, and his familiarity with Mesopotamia and its inhabitants – as it was designed to do. Significantly, Sykes claimed to be able see through the Arab's rhetoric to realise that it was a tendency for laziness, rather than a real belief that it was beneath him to work, that lay at the heart of the Arab's disdain for manual labour. Sykes's exposition on the character of the Mesopotamian Arab continued for some pages before he turned his attention to 'the Kurd', whom he categorised as the 'most unsophisticated and gullible person in the world'.¹⁰⁶ He compared and contrasted the Kurd with the Arab. In particular, he distinguished the Kurdish mind as 'Western [...] albeit undeveloped, in contradistinction to that which we would associate with the Oriental'.¹⁰⁷ There is little nuance or ambiguity to be found in such remarks; they can be read as an assertion of Sykes's knowledge and, therefore, power over the orient.

Sykes's accounts of the characteristics of the Jazirah's Arabs and Kurds were coupled with equally detailed accounts of some of Mesopotamia's other races, and descriptions of the region's climate and geography. His paper was given as a lecture to the Royal Geographical Society in London, at which Gertrude Bell was present and participated in the discussion that followed.¹⁰⁸ Gertrude Bell's account of her journey through Mesopotamia in 1909 was framed around her interest in the ancient archaeology of the region through which she travelled. She devoted the majority of her narrative to descriptions of her search for, and account of, archaeological artefacts or sites. These form the central focus of the account she gives of her travels; they are often long and detailed and accompanied by photographs and diagrams to illustrate her points. Bell described one site of archaeological significance in the following way:

¹⁰⁵ Sykes, pp. 247-8.

¹⁰⁶ Sykes, p. 252,

¹⁰⁷ Sykes, p. 252.

¹⁰⁸ Sykes, p. 237.

On the opposite bank the great castle of Halebîyeh lifts its walls from the river almost to the summit of the hill, a towered triangle of which the apex is the citadel that dominates all the defile (Fig. 46) Twenty minutes lower down, the Mesopotamian bank is crowned by the sister fortress of Zelebîyeh. It is a much less important building. The walls, set with rectangular towers, enclose three sides of an oblong court; the fourth side — that towards the river — must also have been walled, and it is probable that the castle approached more nearly to a square than at present appears, for the current has undermined the precipitous bank and the western part of the fortifications has fallen away. The masonry is of large blocks of stone, faced on the interior and on the exterior of the walls, while the core is mainly of rubble and mortar. There are six towers, including the corner bastions, in the length of the east wall, and between the two central towers is an arched gate. [...]

The name Zelebîyeh carries with it the memory of an older title; in the heyday of Palmyrene prosperity a fortress called after Zenobia guarded the trade route from her capital into Persia, and all authorities are agreed that the fortress of Zenobia described by Procopius is identical with Halebîyeh. Procopius states further that Justinian, who rebuilt Zenobia and Circesium, refortified the next castle to Circesium, which he calls Annouca. The Arab geographers make mention of a small town, Khânûhah, midway between Karkîsiyâ (Circesium) and Rakkah, and the probable identity of Annouca and Khânûkah has already been observed by Moritz. But I think it likely that the flourishing mediaeval Arab town was situated not in the confined valley below Zelebîyeh but at Abu 'Atîk, where the ruin field is much larger. It may be that there was a yet older settlement at Abu 'Atîk, and that the stone foundations there belonged to the town of Annouca which stood at the head of the defile, while the castle of the same name guarded the lower end.¹⁰⁹

This is an excerpt from a relatively short account Bell gave her readers of Mesopotamian architecture. She devoted pages upon pages to these very detailed descriptions and their accompanying diagrams. In addition, she provided details of how and where she found the sites, often correcting their plotted situations on maps. This had the dual effect of informing the reader who may have wished to follow in her footsteps, and also of demonstrating her knowledge of these areas, their history and modern significance. Bell recalled: 'I wished to examine two towers which stand upon the crest of a high ridge about half an hour to the east. They are called by the Arabs The Windmills, but in reality they are tower tombs'.¹¹⁰ It is likely that Bell did know more about the archaeological significance of such ruins than the local people, for whom they may have simply become familiar landmarks, as her description suggests. But in her emphasis on the distinction between her knowledge of the true nature of

¹⁰⁹ Bell, *Amurath*, pp. 67-8.

¹¹⁰ Bell, *Amurath*, p. 36.

such sites and the ignorance of Mesopotamia's inhabitants, she was asserting her knowledge of the orient and actively re-defining it: cartographically, archaeologically and semantically.

In other accounts, Mesopotamians were perceived to understand only the monetary value, ascribed by western buyers, of the archaeological artefacts they found. Writing in the catalogue to the *Exhibition of the Faience of Persia and the Near East*, held at the Burlington Fine Arts Club in 1907, Charles Hercules Read despaired of 'the innate mendacity of the Oriental Nomad'.¹¹¹ Reflecting generally on the problems of amassing ancient artefacts from the east, he lamented the fact that 'if a vase be really from excavations in Asia Minor he will surely declare it come from the neighbourhood of Teheran [...]. Whatever the reason, the story of the cosmopolitan oriental is untrustworthy, and thus, though ample new material is daily coming into the market, it provides us little sure ground for additions to the history of the wares'.¹¹² Although Read did not refer to Mesopotamia directly, this sort of complaint was frequently made about the peoples of the east as a whole. Drawing on the stereotype of the mendacious 'Oriental', Read's claims asserted the power of western knowledge over 'the East'. Only through western interpretation, he suggested, could the raw materials of Eastern artefacts be transformed into trustworthy knowledge, a preserve of the West.

This process is epitomised in Henry Layard's nineteenth-century excavations for the British museum. Layard was made famous in the mid-nineteenth century by his discoveries of Assyrian palaces in Nimrud and Kuyunjik in northern Mesopotamia. His two books, *Nineveh and Its Remains* (1849) and *Nineveh and Babylon* (1853), and the Assyrian remains his excavations secured for the British Museum's collections were very well received in Britain.¹¹³ More than half a century after Layard's excavations, his legacy still played an important role in the way British travellers perceived Mesopotamia. David Fraser mythologized Layard's achievement until its epic status rivalled the grandness of the empires he had uncovered:

¹¹¹ Burlington Fine Arts Club, *Exhibition of the Faience of Persia and the Near East* with an Introduction by C.H. Read (London: [n. pub.], 1907), pp. ix-x.

¹¹² Burlington Fine Arts Club, pp. ix-x.

¹¹³ See Frederick N. Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture: Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Across the Tigris stand the mounds that are all that remain of the glories of the capital of Assyria. Nineveh has a history that stretches throughout a period nearly 2000 years long, ending with its fall about the 6th century before Christ. From that time until Layard with reverent hands unveiled the palaces of Assurbanipal and Sennacherib, and unearthed the literary chamber containing the famous deluge tablets, the ruins of Nineveh, for two thousand five hundred long years, have slept undisturbed.¹¹⁴

Fraser's description evoked the grandeur of the Assyrian empire, and the awe it inspired in British travellers. His description also highlighted the important role Layard's excavations continued to play in creating an interest in Mesopotamia's ancient civilizations in Britain. Layard's work had brought Mesopotamia's ancient empires to life, 'unveiled' the power of the Assyrian kings to the world. His excavations played a pivotal role in transporting Mesopotamia's history from the pages of history books into the exhibition galleries of the British Museum and the imaginations of British travellers to Mesopotamia in this period.

The traveller Ely Bannister Soane's often irreverent account sums up the frequency with which Layard and Nineveh (they were almost synonymous) were mentioned by western travellers. 'I suppose it must be the proper thing when writing of Mosul, to expatiate upon the antiquity of Nineveh', he quipped, 'but so much has already been written, that to attempt adequately to treat of it here would be presumption. Suffice to say, that around Mosul, the modern city, which stands opposite the ancient Nineveh, sometime capital of Assyria, are the remains of Nineveh, old and new, while in the neighbourhood are Kalah, Asshur, Hadra, and Khorsabad'.¹¹⁵ Despite the fact that Soane saw himself as outside the traditional mode of representation, with his emphasis on the 'modern city' of Mosul rather than on the ancient, he too defined Mosul in relation to Layard. His use of the biblical names for the area opposite modern-day Mosul, the ancient site of Nineveh, which he also identified as the biblical Kalah, placed his narrative very much in line with others who travelled to Mesopotamia in this period. The prevalence of the descriptions Soane refers to must be a reflection of the popularity of Layard's excavations, and their familiarity for the audience for whom travelogues like Soane's were published. Layard's important discoveries had been some of the earliest and most significant to

¹¹⁴ David Fraser, *The Short Cut to India: The Record of a Journey Along the Route of the Baghdad Railway [...]* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1909), pp. 279-80.

¹¹⁵ Soane, p. 89.

the study of Mesopotamia's early civilizations. It was within this context – one that misplaced Mesopotamia's ancient history within a western frame of reference – that Mesopotamia was understood by these British travellers to Mesopotamia.

For some travellers, Layard's excavated artefacts in the British Museum became the genuine article, and travellers looked for representations *of them* in Mesopotamia, the land of their origin. The Assyrian reliefs that Gertrude Bell encountered in Mesopotamia reminded her of those that Layard had excavated and transported to London; Bell wrote that in Mesopotamia 'the myriad soldiers of the Great King, *transported from the reliefs in the British Museum*, marched through the gates of Asshur; the captives, roped and bound, crowded the streets'.¹¹⁶ This perception relocates their place of origin to a British institution and away from the land where they had actually been created. Mrs Hume-Griffith advised her readers that 'Nineveh is best seen to-day at the British Museum or the Louvre, Paris, as both of these places contain many interesting and valuable remains of that city.'¹¹⁷ For her, Europe's appropriated artefacts better represented Mesopotamia's ancient history than Mesopotamia itself.

For Bell, even the real-life practices of Mesopotamians were taken straight out of the reliefs that Layard had uncovered. She recalled watching a group of people crossing a river using 'an inflated goat-skin' as a float. She remarked that she 'had not seen this entertaining process, except on the Assyrian reliefs in the British Museum, and I watched it with unabated zest during the greater part of an afternoon.'¹¹⁸ In this description, Mesopotamia's inhabitants are once again transported to a different time; in their use of the inflated goat skins they had become, for Bell, an animated image of Assyrian life – which for her was indelibly associated with Henry Layard's discoveries.

This dislocation of the origins of the Mesopotamian artefacts that Layard had transported to London can be seen as part of a wider appropriation of Mesopotamian history and culture in the early twentieth century. British travellers and commentators used different methods to appropriate the less easily transportable elements of Mesopotamian history and culture to a western discourse. They described

¹¹⁶Bell, *Amurath*, p. 226. (My emphasis)

¹¹⁷ Hume-Griffith, p. 174.

¹¹⁸Bell, *Amurath*, p. 71.

the history they sought in travelling to Mesopotamia in a way that perceived Mesopotamia's ancient civilizations as the progenitors of a western rather than eastern or oriental civilization. In so doing, they appropriated Mesopotamia's history and culture, like its archaeological artefacts, as their own. On her arrival in Baghdad, Louisa Jebb reflected:

They [the Arabs and their boats] had borne us from the wilds and fastnesses of the unconquered East to the gateway of the Western invasion; through the dreariness and desolation of desert lands, through the magnificent isolation of gorgeous mountain scenery, past the ruined evidences of *ancient Western civilisations still mocked by the persistence of squalid tribal huts*; and now, having deposited us to draw our own conclusions in this decayed city of the Khalifs, they hurried on, lapping scornfully in their course at the rocking pleasure-boats of messrs. Sasson's representatives and the white steam launch of HM British vice-Consulate.¹¹⁹

Just as Edwin Pears had noted that the future railway would traverse 'the sites of the most ancient *western* civilizations',¹²⁰ thus appropriating the civilizations he admired as western, upon her arrival at this paradigmatic Eastern city, most identified as the capital of Abbasid power, Jebb was dismayed by the ruined evidences 'of ancient Western civilisations'. Not only did she understand the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia as the origin of *western* civilization, but so far were they from any Eastern cultural history in her mind, that they were 'mocked' by the very conditions of existence of Eastern peoples: 'the persistence of squalid tribal huts'.

Some British travellers and commentators defined Mesopotamia primarily as a biblical land. Mesopotamia was identified as the land through which two of the rivers of the Garden of Eden flowed:¹²¹

A stream flowed in Eden and watered the garden; beyond Eden it divided into four rivers. The first is the Pishan [...] the second is the Gihon, it flows around the country of Cush. The third is the Tigris, which flows East of Assyria and the Fourth is the Euphrates.¹²²

Many places within Mesopotamia were known by their biblical or ancient names; thus the biblical Erech also refers to 'Sumerian Uruk, Greek Orchoë, modern Tall al-Warka'.¹²³ For Louisa Jebb it was Mesopotamia's biblical significance that gave what

¹¹⁹ Jebb, p. 240. My emphasis.

¹²⁰ Pears, p. 570.

¹²¹ Genesis 2. 14

¹²² Genesis 2. 10-15.

¹²³ 'Erech', in *Encyclopædia Britannica* <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9032871/Erech>> [accessed 25 April 2008]

she otherwise saw as a barren, lifeless, uncivilized land its *raison d'être*. As she travelled through Mesopotamia's desert, Jebb reflected that:

[It] had always been silent and would be silent for ever more - a dead, unconscious silence, with no significance save of absence of life.

And yet still for us 'the wind uttered' and 'the spirit heard' his vainglorious cry: "Is not this the great Babylon that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power and for the honour of my majesty?"

The silent answer to it lay at our feet. And, listening, we heard the solemn warnings of Daniel, the sorrowful forebodings of Jeremiah, and, above all, the ironical voice of Isaiah:-

"Let them stand up and save thee, Mappers of heavens, Planet observers, Tellers of new moons, from what must befall thee."¹²⁴

Here Mesopotamia's biblical significance breathed life into the otherwise lifeless desert, 'a land which had never been alive with the stir of humanity even in far-off ages'. Indeed, it was western, Christian ears that could hear the word of God in an otherwise desolate land.

Soane's narrative, like the accounts of his contemporaries, is also peppered with references to the biblical or ancient significance of the places that he encountered: 'This Daur, or Dura as it was anciently called, has a very old history indeed, for we read of it in the Bible'.¹²⁵ Mark Sykes told his audience that 'Ain el Arus is a famous shrine, and is the legendary site of the marriage and wedding festivities of the prophet Abraham'.¹²⁶ William Willcocks also conceived of Mesopotamia as primarily a biblical land. As discussed, he saw his project as the restoration of the Garden of Eden.¹²⁷ Such identification of Mesopotamia as a biblical land also located it within a western discourse.

Willcocks illustrated this conflation of ancient, biblical and modern-day names when he told his audience at the Royal Geographical Society that:

The second river was Gihon, the modern Hindia, the Chebar of Ezekiel, who lies buried on its banks, the Ahava of Ezra, the Pallacopus of Alexander, and the Nahr Kufa of the early khalifs. It is represented as encompassing the whole land

¹²⁴Jebb, p. 255-6.

¹²⁵Soane, p. 360.

¹²⁶Sykes, p. 238.

¹²⁷Sir William Willcocks K.C.M.G., 'The Garden of Eden and its Restoration', *The Geographical Journal*, 40 (1912), 129-145. And Prof. Sayce, John Jackson, L. W. King, F. R. Maunsell and William Willcocks, 'The Garden of Eden and its Restoration: Discussion' *The Geographical Journal*, 40 (1912), 145-148.

of Kis or Kutha or Cush, the father of Nimrod, the beginning of whose kingdom was Erech and Akkad and Calneh and Babylon.¹²⁸

On Willcocks's 1912 map of Lower Mesopotamia, the process of super-imposing western names on the Mesopotamian landscape is demonstrated geographically. Willcocks's map noted the modern place names of the cities and geographical features of the landscape; in addition, his annotations pointed out sites of ancient or biblical significance. His map showed the ancient sites of Sumer, Akkad and 'Ur of the Chaldees'. He also located Babylon next to the modern town on Hit; the town of Anah was annotated as the 'Garden of Eden of the Semites', and the map shows the site of the biblical Erech.

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¹²⁸ Sir William Willcocks K.C.M.G, 'Mesopotamia: Past, Present, and Future', *The Geographical Journal*, 35 (1910), 1-15 (p. 2).

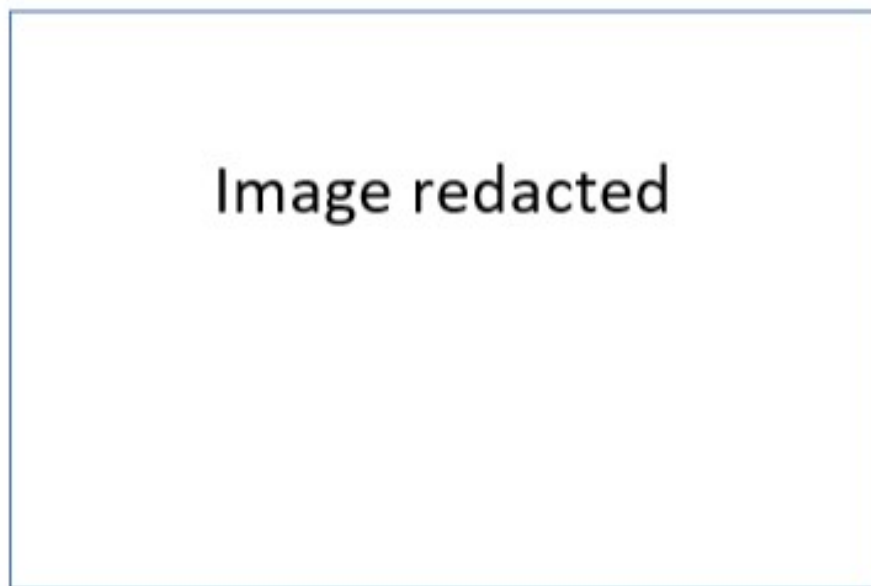


Figure 5. Sir William Willcocks's map of 'Lower Mesopotamia', 1912.¹²⁹

To understand Mesopotamia primarily as a biblical land involved a renaming of Mesopotamian places – literally a re-definition of Mesopotamia rooted in a western, Judaeo-Christian tradition.

¹²⁹ Cited in: Willcocks, 'The Garden of Eden and its Restoration', unnumbered.

Many of these travellers used the classics as guides to contemporary Mesopotamia, or contextualised their narratives with reference to the histories of the Hellenistic or Roman empires. Such references located the region's history and culture within a western tradition of learning. Gertrude Bell and Louisa Jebb identified the classics as the best guides to Mesopotamia, and both referred to the descriptions of Herodotus.¹³⁰ Bell traced the journeys of Alexander, Julian, and other figures of classical antiquity, as she travelled:

It was not to those red-bound volumes which we are accustomed to associate with travel that I turned, but to the best of all guide-books to Mesopotamia, the *Anabasis* and Ammianus Marcellinus. In a moment I was back in the ranks of the Ten Thousand and of the Roman legions, but what a change had come over them since we parted from them at Anah! Cyrus had fallen in the disastrous confusion of Cunaxa, which, but for his fatal wound, might have crowned his campaign with victory. Julian, misled by omens, had turned away from Ctesiphon.¹³¹

Bell's emphasis on these texts can be seen as a reminder to the reader of her extensive knowledge of Mesopotamia's history, culture and languages, and an effort to assert her authority within a male-dominated tradition. Moreover, she was consciously dissociating herself from tourists whose 'red-bound' Baedeker guides she rejected, so demonstrating her more serious engagement with the region. Melman argues that women's travel narratives should be distinguished from men's because 'in contrast to the hegemonic Orientalist discussion, women's discourse on the Orient evolved outside the main locations of "metropolitan knowledge and power"'.¹³²

However, in Bell's case this was not entirely applicable. Although she was a woman functioning within a male domain, she was a respected and remarkably well-connected one. Bell's education, her familial connections and the society she moved in set her apart from her female contemporaries. But perhaps more than the advantages afforded her by her social status, her intelligence and self-confidence led her to demand her place *within* the male patriarchal tradition, rather than to function outside it in the way that Melman describes. Far more than Louisa Jebb, Bell was part of the (patriarchal) establishment; her contribution at Mark Sykes's lecture led the Chairman to conclude by expressing his desire that more women were in attendance:

¹³⁰ Jebb, p. 253.

¹³¹ Bell, *Amurath*, p. 200.

¹³² Billie Melman, *Women's Orient: English Women and the Middle East, 1718-1918: Sexuality, Religion and Work*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 8.

'Miss Lowthian Bell has paid a very just tribute to the Society. We are always very glad to obtain papers from ladies, and we are most anxious that they should join with us in every possible way in extending geographical knowledge'.¹³³

Moreover, references to the classics were also common in the narratives of her male contemporaries. Ely Soane, for example, described the town of 'Daur' in the following terms:

Here the Roman army, after Julian was dead, attempted the passage of the Tigris [...] and here Jovian, who succeeded Julian, having retreated from Ctesiphon, made a treaty with the Persians which gave them back the northern Mesopotamian provinces. Here at the same ford attempted by the Romans, we saw a caravan of asses being swum across the river, their drivers effecting the transit by wading part of the way and swimming the rest.¹³⁴

Soane, too, located Mesopotamia within a history of the Roman Empire. David Fraser reflected the importance of history to his understanding of Mesopotamia when he concluded that '[in Mesopotamia] every inch of ground is classic, and redolent of Chaldean, Assyrian and Parthian, among the more ancient civilizations, and of Roman, Persian and Arab, among the later'.¹³⁵ The fact that references to the classics were not solely used by female travellers suggests that they should be seen as part of a broader conception of Mesopotamia, which located its history and culture within a western tradition of learning. References to the classics, like the importance attributed to Layard's excavations and the emphasis on Mesopotamia as a biblical land, were an important part of the definition of Mesopotamia's 'civilized past' as western.

The 'Other' Mesopotamia

Although these British travellers saw much that was familiar in Mesopotamia, many elements of Mesopotamia remained alien to them. Mesopotamia's alterity was most often expressed in orientalist stereotypes, which depicted the region and its inhabitants as not only different, but inferior to those who described them. In these accounts, Mesopotamian men were depicted as afflicted with 'Oriental Fatalism'; they were seen as lazy and fundamentally incapable of any

¹³³ Cited in Sykes, p. 395.

¹³⁴ Soane, p. 361

¹³⁵ Fraser, *Fortnightly Review*, p. 281.

initiative or positive action. Fraser saw 'groups of white-clad Arabs [who] sat in the arches smoking and gazing into space'.¹³⁶ Similarly, Bell wrote of a homogenous group who 'no matter what their degree, all wore the singularly abandoned aspect to which only the Oriental on a journey can attain'.¹³⁷ Mesopotamia's women were either entirely ignored by British travellers and commentators or, where they were considered, were sexualised and depicted as non-participants in Mesopotamian life. Louisa Jebb described a typical scene in the following way:

The plain is suddenly dotted with bending, praying forms, groups of excited talking Arabs, isolated, contemplative, smoking individuals, fussy superior Turkish officers flicking the specks of travel off their smart uniforms; veiled women peep from behind the curtain of a closely packed conveyance; a small Arab child plants himself with outstretched legs in front of us, and sucks his thumb in complete absorption as he gazes upon us like a little wild animal.¹³⁸

Jebb's description grouped the people she encountered into defining clusters. Even the 'smoking individuals' she noted were not individual at all, but, like the others she described, were a group defined by their solitude. None but the small child – who in a continuation of the barbarity she associated with Arabs in general is a 'little wild animal' – are distinguished by any individual characteristics. The women who 'peep' silently from behind their veils lack all distinguishing traits; hidden behind a partition, the women are here reduced to their peeping gaze: a fleeting presence, undistinguished by any mark of individuality.

It is clear that though the terms 'Arab' or 'Arabs' might be interpreted to include Arab women, women were rarely included by these epithets. In Jebb's description above, the women were not included in the 'groups of excited talking Arabs'. In a later passage, Jebb observed an approaching group: 'first came half a dozen Arabs, then a veiled woman, then a donkey'.¹³⁹ The term Arab here referred only to the Arab man, whilst the Arab woman was distinguished from the group by the addition of a description of her gender. Mark Sykes, too, noted that 'the Arabs may be divided roughly into two kinds – those who work a little, and those who do nothing at all'.¹⁴⁰ This would suggest that he believed all Arabs to be afflicted by fatalistic laziness. However, later in his paper Sykes told his audience that some Arab tribes had

¹³⁶ Fraser, *Fortnightly Review*, p. 274.

¹³⁷ Bell, *Amurath*, p. 103.

¹³⁸ Jebb, p. 246.

¹³⁹ Jebb, p. 246.

¹⁴⁰ Sykes, p. 248.

‘the habit of leaving a great portion of the work to the women, and it is no uncommon thing to see a woman with a child on her back either ploughing or digging a canal while her husband dozes in the tent’.¹⁴¹ Sykes’s example makes it clear that he did not include Arab women in his conclusion that all Arabs were lazy and incapable of hard work. He used ‘Arabs’ to refer only to Arab men.

Where Mesopotamian women were described in greater detail, they were overtly sexualised. For example, Bell recalled an encounter with a woman whom she described as ‘the famous Shemash’:

We gave the mare a feed of corn – her gentle, hungry eyes were turned appealingly on our full mangers; but to Shemash I was harder hearted, though her eyes were more beautiful than those of the mare. She came suppliant as I sat dining on the Mudir’s roof at nightfall and begged me to recover her husband’s rifle, which lay below in the hands of the government. Her straight brows were pencilled together with indigo and a short blue line marked the roundness of her white chin; a cloak slipping backwards from her head showed the rows of scarlet beads about her throat, and as she drew it together with slender fingers, Fattuh, Hussein and I gazed on her with unmixed approval.¹⁴²

Bell allied her female gaze and perspective on Shemash with those of her male companions. This can be read as another instance where Bell identified herself within, rather than at the periphery of, both patriarchal modes of power and oriental life. The unification of her gaze with that of her companions implied that Bell was not merely a western spectator, but that she also saw this woman as her eastern travel companions did. Therefore, despite the fact that the person describing her was a woman, the perspective is a male one that sexually objectified Shemash.

Bell highlighted the power imbalance between herself and Shemash; she wrote that Shemash ‘came suppliant’ and ‘begged’ her to help. In so doing, Bell evoked an image of herself as Shemash’s potential rescuer: a traditionally male role. Whether Bell’s gaze was truly an eastern one, as her comment would have the reader believe, is more debatable. Bell’s description exoticises Shemash; she did not merely draw the reader’s attention to the traits of her beauty, such as her beautiful eyes, but to those exotic traits that only an oriental woman might have. Bell described the indigo between Shemash’s brows and the veil that slipped backwards to reveal suggestive ‘scarlet beads’ about her throat. Bell’s description evokes the classic orientalist trope,

¹⁴¹ Sykes, p. 250.

¹⁴² Bell, *Amurath*, p. 123.

whereby the Arab woman's veiled and modest attire hides a seductress. Said writes that 'the association between the Orient and sex is remarkably persistent';¹⁴³ he argues that the power of orientalist discourse was at least in part underpinned by the image of the Arab who 'produces himself endlessly, sexually, and little else'.¹⁴⁴ In reproducing these orientalist tropes, Bell entered into their power over the people she described.

Similarly, David Fraser described a group of women he saw bathing as he travelled by boat down the Tigris:

We whisk round a little cape and come full upon a tiny bay with sandy shores, where within a few yards are desporting themselves a bathing party of women and children. They are so astonished at our sudden apparition that they just stand transfixed as we first catch sight of them, and remain so until we are swept out of sight. One soft-rounded figure with glistening russet skin will be standing knee-deep in the water, with her back to the river and her hands dipped to splash a little flock of crowing infants. She delays the splashing and just turns her head to see us pass. Another full blown rose perhaps stands in an attitude of languid amusement watching the play, her feet in the water, arms thrown up, and hands behind her head, Psyche to the very life. Half-grown girls running about like fawns suddenly halt on one foot and stare at us with their big brown eyes. In the rear will be pairs of squatting figures, one braiding the other's hair, the other watching the process in a little flashing mirror. For background there are boiling pots, grey old women busily washing, and great patches of coloured garments spread out to dry upon the silver sand. Grouped here and there is the fascinating variety of corn-coloured, golden, peach-pink; creamy, glowing skin, covering figures in every attitude of grace and abandonment, with never a rag to hide the curved and swelling lines.¹⁴⁵

Fraser's description of the Mesopotamian women is reminiscent of the orientalist paintings by artists such as Eugene Delacroix, Jean Leon Gérôme, William James Muller, John Frederick Lewis and Thomas Seddon. David Scott writes that orientalists 'turned to the Orient as an exotically different world which became a real alternative to their own',¹⁴⁶ but also because they saw in the east the origins of their own civilizations:

European painters and writers were nevertheless also anxious to explore in the East the historical and ideological roots of classical and Christian civilization in their Hebrew and Egyptian origins, to rediscover and renew the elements of

¹⁴³ Said, p. 309.

¹⁴⁴ Said, p. 312.

¹⁴⁵ Fraser, p. 273.

¹⁴⁶ David Scott, *Eastern Encounters: Orientalist Painters of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Fine Art Society in association with David Hughes and Louise Whitford Ltd, 1978.), p. 4.

Oriental culture which the West had over the centuries absorbed into its own.¹⁴⁷

Like these British travellers and commentators of the early twentieth century, the orientalist conceived of the east as both the progenitor of western civilization and as barbaric and exotic in its contemporary existence. Fraser's description is reminiscent of Jean Leon Gérôme's 1903 painting *View of Medinet El-Fayoum*:¹⁴⁸

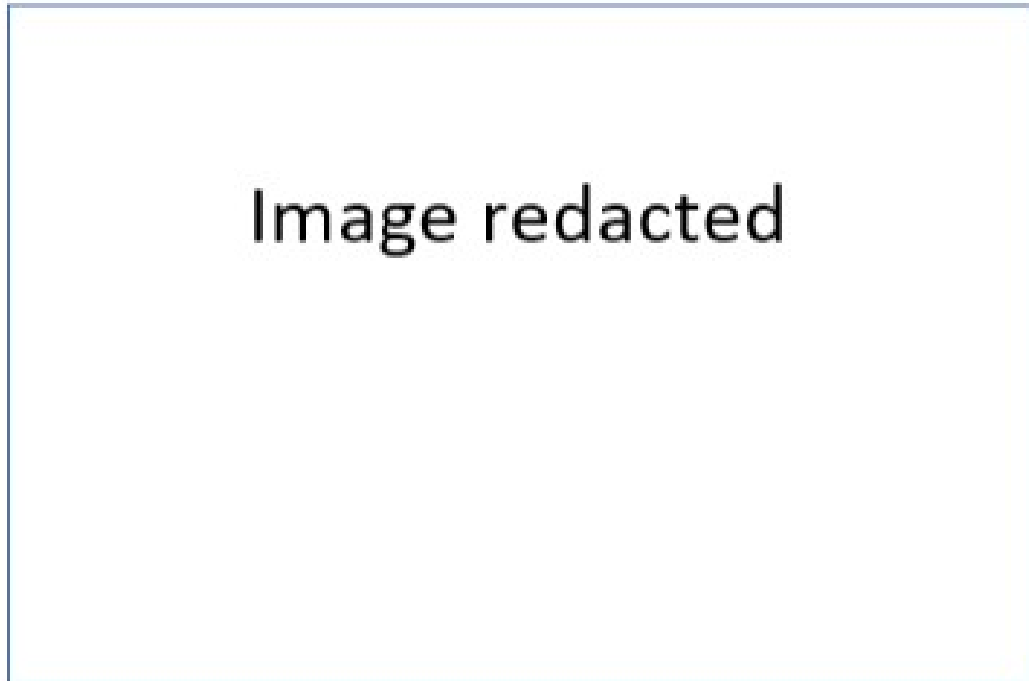


Figure 6. Jean Leon Gérôme, *View of Medinet El-Fayoum*

Gérôme was a well-known painter and sculptor who taught at the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts*. His paintings of the Orient are exemplary of the genre; indeed, his *Snake Charmer* was used on the dust jacket of Said's *Orientalism* in 1978.¹⁴⁹ In her 1983 essay 'The Imaginary Orient', Linda Nochlin argues that the realism of orientalist paintings, exemplified by the work of Gérôme, fools the viewer into believing that what they represent is a realistic, impartial view of the east. Drawing on *Orientalism*, she argues that, on the contrary, orientalist paintings reproduced the cultural

¹⁴⁷ Scott, p. 4.

¹⁴⁸ Jean Leon Gérôme, *View of Medinet El-Fayoum*, Oil on canvas, Private Collection 49cm x 74cm (1903) in Gerald M. Ackerman, *The Life and Work of Jean Leon Gérôme: With a Catalogue Raisonné* (London: Sotheby Publications, 1986), p. 288.

¹⁴⁹ Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991).

prejudices and stereotypes of the east held by the painters' societies. Consequently orientalist paintings often represented the men of the orient as lazy or barbaric and its women as sexually available. Arguing for the adoption of Said's ideas in the field of art history, Nochlin asserts:

Surely it may most profitably be considered as a visual document of nineteenth-century colonialist ideology, an iconic distillation of the Westerner's notion of the Oriental couched in the language of a would-be transparent naturalism.¹⁵⁰

View of Medinet El-Fayoum is one of Gérôme's much later and less discussed works, and was first exhibited just a year before his death, at the Salon of 1903.¹⁵¹ In both Fraser's scene and Gérôme's *View of Medinet El-Fayoum*, the women appear to frolic unaware or undisturbed by the stranger's gaze. Gérôme's painting, like Fraser's later description, depicted the 'soft-rounded figure[s]' of oriental women. Fraser's descriptions of the girl who 'delays the splashing and just turns her head to see us pass', or those 'half-grown girls running about like fawns [who] suddenly halt on one foot and stare at us with their big brown eyes' suggest that, like the orientalist painters, Fraser is hinting that these women are enjoying the male gaze upon their naked bodies. Like the lounging odalisques of the orientalists, Fraser's women sport 'an attitude of languid amusement' and are 'figures in every attitude of grace and abandonment, with never a rag to hide the curved and swelling lines'. Fraser's use of Psyche to describe one of the women places his scene in a tradition of western art and evokes the paintings of bathing women in the orient, which would have been familiar to his audience.

In *Ways of Seeing* John Berger argues that in the history of western art:

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object- and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.¹⁵²

This imbalance of power, which objectifies the female body, is all the more problematic when one considers Gérôme's painting or Fraser's description of oriental

¹⁵⁰ Nochlin, p. 35.

¹⁵¹ Ackerman, p. 288.

¹⁵² John Berger, *Ways of Seeing: Based on the BBC Series with John Berger* (London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972), p.47. Emphasis his.

women. The naked body of the oriental woman is objectified on a sexual level, as a western woman's body would be by the male gaze, but she is also disempowered racially. Although Nochlin does not discuss Gérôme's *View of Medinet El-Fayoum*, she concludes that:

Like many other art works of his time, Gérôme's Orientalist painting managed to body forth two ideological assumptions about power: one about men's power over women; the other about white men's superiority to, hence justifiable control over, inferior, darker races, precisely those who indulge in this sort of regrettably lascivious commerce.¹⁵³

Like Gérôme's painting, Fraser's description of the bathing women objectified the women's bodies sexually and asserted his power over them.

Mesopotamia's Inhospitable Climate

Mesopotamia's alterity also manifested itself in its inhospitable climate and geography. European travellers struggled to cope with the arid deserts and fluctuations in temperature that seemed to assault their senses. David Fraser quipped that 'June in Mesopotamia and adjacent regions is like summer in Hades, and fit for none to travel in but salamanders, corpses and correspondents of the Press'.¹⁵⁴ Sykes argued that Mesopotamia's climate rendered it unsuitable as a potential western colony, and concluded that 'we must remember that the idea of European colonization is hardly one that can be entertained. [...] The Jazirah is not a country for white men to work in'.¹⁵⁵ Mesopotamia's climate was seen actively to repel the European; the implication of Sykes's paper was that it was a place that could only be inhabited by lazy Arabs. In many accounts, Mesopotamia was described as a barren, lifeless place; Jebb described 'a dreary country of broken grey stones with no sign of vegetation or life of any kind'.¹⁵⁶ And for Gertrude Bell it was at times 'a horrible wilderness, stony, waterless and devoid of any growing thing'.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Nochlin, p. 45.

¹⁵⁴ Fraser, *Fortnightly Review*, p. 271.

¹⁵⁵ Sykes, p. 394.

¹⁵⁶ Louisa Jebb, 'That Unblessed Land Mesopotamia', *Longman's Magazine*, 44 (1904), 47-53 (p.47).

¹⁵⁷ Bell, *Amurath*, p. 101.

The inhospitable Mesopotamian desert was the most repellent aspect of Mesopotamia's climate and geography to British travellers, yet it seemed to fascinate them. In one passage from *Amurath to Amurath*, Bell described a scene she had witnessed, where two parties came before a *Kadi* or Judge to settle a dispute:

The sheik came in dressed in the full panoply of the desert, black-and-gold cloak, black kerchief and white under-robe; his skin was darkened by the sun, his beard coal-black. The merchant was a shaven, white-faced townsman in a European coat. The pair were, to my fancy, symbolic of the east and the advancing west, and I backed the west [...]. [After] a few moments of angry recrimination they were both dismissed to gather further evidence; but the Kadi called the sheikh back and shook his finger at him. "Open your eyes, oh sheikh," said he. "Asia, open your eyes!"¹⁵⁸

For Bell, the two men were literally as different as black and white: the shaikh was identified by his 'black-and-gold cloak' and 'black kerchief'; 'his skin was darkened by the sun' and 'his beard coal-black' was to be contrasted with the 'white-faced' townsman with his shaven face and 'European coat'. The Shaikh was conflated with the desert, which for Bell, however exciting, was a backward place, directly opposed to legal order, Europe, the West and progress.

The extremes of heat and cold in the desert seemed actively to reject the presence of British travellers. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the desert seemed to magnify their negative perceptions of the country. Bell wrote that 'even those who cannot properly be numbered among the criminal classes catch an infection from the lawless air of the desert'.¹⁵⁹ And if Mesopotamia was generally perceived as a place populated by simple, backward people, the desert was positively primordial. This primitivism did not always carry with it the negativity of other perceptions of Mesopotamia as a backward place. Instead, the desert was often seen as a comforting place in which to connect with the essentials of one's soul.

Priya Satia maintains that British travellers went to Arabia in search of this primordial sense of peace, but also because it was the very difficulty of surviving in the desert that appealed to them; they wanted to emulate the almost superhuman Bedouin who chose to make this inhospitable climate their home. She argues that British travellers believed that if they could acquire the qualities of the Bedouin, these would combine with their European qualities to render them superior to the desert

¹⁵⁸ Bell, *Amurath*, pp. 71-2.

¹⁵⁹ Bell, *Amurath*, p. 67.

peoples themselves.¹⁶⁰ This idea can be seen in some of Bell's descriptions of the desert:

Now no-one rides into the desert, however uncertain the adventure, without a keen sense of exhilaration. The bright morning sun, the wide clean levels, the knowledge that the problems of existence are reduced on a sudden to their simplest expression, your own wit and endurance being the sole determining factors – all these things brace and quicken the spirit.¹⁶¹

In this extract, Bell clearly saw the desert as a challenge to be overcome, almost relishing the uncertainty and problems she identified as part of desert travel. She thrived upon the obstacles presented by the desert, savouring the opportunity to test her 'wit and endurance' against its challenges.

Similarly, Louisa Jebb reflected:

But when you lie on your back on a sandy desert with nothing within measurable distance of you, and the rain beats mercilessly down or the wind howls through the crevices of your garments, *you are conscious of battling against great primeval forces akin to the unknown elements of your own being*; you cannot escape from them, for there is no shelter round the corner: you are brought up face to face with something fundamental; all the little accessories with which we have learnt to shield ourselves fall away, and you are just there, stripped yourself, and in the middle of naked realities.¹⁶²

Jebb was clearly proud to have survived her battle against the 'great primeval forces' she described. Her vision of the desert draws the reader's attention to its challenges: the rain is merciless and the wind howls. Like Bell, Jebb saw the desert as a place that forced travellers to look deep within themselves for the resources to survive. In her insistence that the desert stripped (European) travellers of the luxuries afforded them by the modernity of their western culture, and her use of words such as 'primeval' and 'fundamental' to describe the difficulties posed by the desert environment, she stressed the distance between her own, 'modern', civilization and that of the desert.

More often, however, travellers revelled in the other-worldliness of the desert landscape. Evoking the magical world of the *Arabian Nights*, their descriptions of the desert describe a place that plunged them into a world of mystique and spiritual beauty. Thus, Bell writes:

¹⁶⁰ Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 35.

¹⁶¹ Bell, *Amurath*, p. 116.

¹⁶² Jebb, p. 15. My emphasis.

The thin blue smoke of the morning camp fires rose out of the hollows and my heart rose with it, for here was the life of the desert, in open spaces under the open sky, and when once you have known it, the eternal savage in your breast rejoices at the return to it.¹⁶³

Bell's return to the desert was also a return to a primordial state; she rejoiced in the feeling only possible in a barbaric, ancient and unchanging place that awakened 'the eternal savage' in her.

The mystification of the desert as an other-worldly place reached its pinnacle in the idea of the mirage. The mirage was described as physical distortion of the senses affected by the desert landscape. Sykes related to his audience his experience of a mirage:

The atmosphere which is at once clear and hazy, produces a very curious illusion – a stone 800 yards away appears to be close at hand, while a mountain on the horizon which is not more than 6 miles away appears to be treble the distance; the two effects combined give an impression of a vastness and space that it is difficult to describe in words. The sky, which in spring is often cloudy and overcast, throws strange streaky shadows over the landscape, and a dull indefinite line of grey on the horizon will change suddenly to a clear bright ridge of yellow hills, which is equally quickly transmuted to a dark, forbidding range of purple mountains; the wadies form trailing serpents of olive-green and brilliant flowers; the rolling steppes run in lines of grey and green, thus marking the good grazing-land from the stony tracts. On the sky-line herds of camels move almost imperceptibly to and fro cropping the grass, while on the hillsides dappled flocks of sheep speckle the country with splashes of black and brown and yellow. The larks while in the air, sing cheerily. Now and again a rare thunderstorm comes rushing across the land – a dark curtain of black, from which the huge falling drops smite the dusty ground, the hills and distant plains vanish, the horizon closes in, the ground turns yellow and red, the yellow lightning sends an unearthly sheen upon the grass, and for ten minutes we are in a strange unknown world of rushing waters, roaring wind, and rolling thunder. The storm passes over, the camels and sheep begin to move again, the larks are once more in voice, and, save for a little brightness in the sky, the desert is as it was before.¹⁶⁴

The mirage, which would play an important role in the way the Mesopotamian campaign was conducted and perceived during the First World War, was the epitome of the mystification of the Mesopotamian landscape. As Sykes's description suggests, it was an entirely alienating and physically disorientating phenomenon. It was an experience that could only be found in the east and that Sykes found 'difficult to express in words'. The desert was the extreme: the place where not even one's own

¹⁶³ Bell, *Amurath*, p. 40

¹⁶⁴ Sykes, pp. 240-241.

senses could be trusted, and where the landscape itself seemed to repel the British traveller.

Nevertheless, here too British travellers saw similarities with their own western experience. Bell reflected that:

To travel in the desert is in one respect curiously akin to travelling on the sea: it gives you no premonition of the changed environment to which the days of journeying are conducting you. When you set sail from a familiar shore you enter on a course from which the usual landmarks of daily existence have been swept away.¹⁶⁵

Even where Mesopotamia was at its most exotic, its furthest away from the European or familiar world, its most other, somehow travellers found a way to relate it back and understand it through a familiar experience. Yet, like Mesopotamia itself, its attraction was ultimately that it was an alien, and alienating, experience. As Bell put it: 'you set sail from a *familiar shore*', but 'you enter on a course from which the usual landmarks of daily existence have been swept away'.

Conclusions

There is a remarkable consistency to the ways in which the inhabitants of Mesopotamia were represented by the travellers, journalists, archaeologist and orientalists that this chapter examines. The prevalence of the stereotypes that Edward Said identified as part of an Orientalist discourse is significant. In the decades since Said's *Orientalism* was published, scholars have drawn attention to the fruitful points of contact that can be seen between the west and its others. Rather than seeing such interactions as fragments of a discourse that asserted its power over the peoples it described, defined and created, scholars have sought to examine the more nuanced relations between peoples despite the imbalance in power between them: to seek out a productive human interaction in the 'interstices'.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Bell, *Amurath*, p. 159.

¹⁶⁶ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 2.

James Clifford has suggested that travel should accordingly be ‘seen as a complex and pervasive spectrum of human experiences’.¹⁶⁷ He maintains that if we pay closer attention to the heterogeneity of travel experiences, to their peculiarities, ‘practices of displacement might emerge as constitutive of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension. The cultural effects of European expansionism, for example, could no longer be celebrated, or deplored, as a simple diffusion outward – of civilization, industry, science, or capital’.¹⁶⁸ Billie Melman, too, has objected to a critical tendency to:

Look at travel as a form of domination. The occidental traveller’s gaze, the explorer’s eye, has been made an emblem of the unequal relations between Europe and the Orient. So much so that another aspect of exploration is forgotten: the comparison between self and ‘other’, between societies and between cultures, that travel makes possible.¹⁶⁹

Homi Bhabha has called our attention to the “‘in-between” spaces’ in which people meet and interact.¹⁷⁰ He has highlighted the importance of the ambiguities to be found in the cracks of the stereotypes that are so prevalent in representations of the other.

Yet, despite its limitations, Said’s analysis of an interlocking web of images – and stereotypes – that define and assert their power over the orient remains a powerful way in which to read the interactions described by the men and women whose accounts have been examined here. Whilst acknowledging the importance of seeing beyond, or in, the fissures within such discourses of power, the extent to which these travellers and writers did reproduce an orientalist discourse must also be acknowledged.

British travellers went to Mesopotamia in search of the history, culture and mystique they associated with the east. What they found amongst, or perhaps (literally) beneath, the surface of the exotic was an image of themselves. They found in the history of Mesopotamia aspects of what they already knew or, as the search for Layard’s triumphs illustrates, what was already familiar in a land that was unfamiliar and understood by them as inferior and barbaric. Mesopotamia was experienced as a place that brought them face to face with a long-forgotten part of who they

¹⁶⁷ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in The Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 3.

¹⁶⁸ Clifford, *Routes*, p. 3.

¹⁶⁹ Melman, p. 9.

¹⁷⁰ Bhabha, p. 2.

understood themselves to be. It was a place that they recognised, but that was in essence alien to them. By appropriating the familiar as their own and understanding what was other to be Mesopotamian, British travellers and commentators could continue to homogenise the people and places of Mesopotamia as oriental, eastern and invariably not only as different, but as inferior.

2

The Mesopotamian Campaign 1914-1916

The First World War was perceived and described by British commentators as both a war *of* European civilizations and as a war *for* civilization – ‘the Great war for civilisation’ as the medals awarded to servicemen proclaimed. Pre-war descriptions of Mesopotamia both highlighted its importance in the history of what was perceived as European or British ‘civilization’, and contrasted this with Mesopotamia’s perceived contemporary backwardness and barbarity. For those who were sent to fight in the ‘cradle of civilization’, these ideas resonated in complex ways, which coloured British servicemen’s impressions of both Mesopotamia and its peoples. Concepts of ‘race’ and ‘civilization’ also impacted on how British military personnel viewed, and interacted with, their ‘native’ colleagues in the Indian army, as they compared and contrasted the behaviour of the races they ruled with those they were only beginning to contemplate ruling directly. This chapter will explore how concepts of civilization combined with theories of race and ideas about empire to shape wartime British perceptions of Mesopotamia and its peoples.

Official or governmental perceptions of Mesopotamia have been thoroughly documented in works such as Briton Cooper Busch’s *Britain, India and the Arabs*, Elizabeth Monroe’s *Britain’s Moment in the Middle East* and Peter Sluglett’s *Britain in Iraq*.¹⁷¹ This chapter will not attempt to examine the way British or Indian governments viewed their role in the future of Mesopotamia. It will concentrate instead on individual reactions to the region, in an attempt to sketch how people on the ground saw, and interacted with, Mesopotamia and its peoples during the first years of the war. It will also trace how Mesopotamia was presented to the British public in contemporary media coverage, letters home and in subsequent publications that described these first years of the campaign. Many of those who had travelled to

¹⁷¹ Briton Cooper Busch, *Britain, India, and the Arabs: 1914-1921* (Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 1971); Elizabeth Monroe, *Britain’s Moment in the Middle East: 1914-1971* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1981); Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country* [1976] (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

Mesopotamia for their own purposes in the years that preceded the war, men and women like Reginald Campbell Thompson, Gertrude Bell and St John Philby, returned as sought-after Arabists to serve their country as political officers during the war; this chapter will also examine the impact of the First World War on their perceptions of Mesopotamia. In particular, it will examine British perceptions of Mesopotamia through an analysis of the defining episode of the Mesopotamian campaign: the siege of Kut and its immediate aftermath.

The siege of Kut defined the Mesopotamian campaign, both for those who fought in Mesopotamia, and for the British public at home. It was the first phase of the Mesopotamian campaign to receive sustained, detailed coverage in the British press. The British papers, which had paid scant attention to the Mesopotamian campaign's successes up to this point, began following the campaign, which everyone believed was on the verge of capturing Baghdad and restoring British prestige in the East after the humiliating evacuation at Gallipoli. Coverage of what became the first British army to surrender with its colours since the battle of Yorktown in 1781 was the British public's first significant exposure to the campaign in Mesopotamia.¹⁷² Indeed, the siege continues to define the Mesopotamian campaign; the events surrounding the fall of Kut are often the main, or only, episode of the campaign detailed in modern histories of the First World War. The surrender of Major-General Charles Townshend's beleaguered garrison was a shocking end to the seemingly unstoppable success that Indian Expeditionary Force D (hereafter IEF D) had enjoyed since the start of its operations in Mesopotamia, in November 1914.

The fall of Kut caused a public outcry, partly because it came in lieu of a much publicised approaching success, but particularly as ministers were forced to admit that medical facilities had been grossly inadequate during Townshend's retreat from Ctesiphon and subsequent entrapment at Kut. The Vincent-Bingley Commission's report, commissioned by the government of India to investigate the shortcomings of the medical services, failed to allay public anxiety and was followed by the Mesopotamia Commission.¹⁷³ This British parliamentary commission was charged with

¹⁷² Priya Satia, 'Developing Iraq: Britain, India and the Redemption of Empire and Technology in the First World War', *Past and Present*, 197 (2007), 211-255 (pp. 1-2).

¹⁷³ The Vincent-Bingley Commission sent its conclusions to the Government of India on 29 June, 1916. The Commission's findings were not published, but its conclusions were accepted by the Mesopotamia Commission and included in its published report. *Royal Commission Appointed by Act of Parliament to*

investigating the military failings that had led to Townshend's humiliating defeat. Chapter three will look at the perceptions of Mesopotamia that are revealed in the Commission's hearings, papers and final conclusions. The siege of Kut can be seen as a microcosm of the early Mesopotamian campaign; the pressures of the siege and the hardships of the gruelling march to the Anatolian prisoner-of-war camps bring into clearer focus the racial tensions that this chapter will investigate.

Those who were sent to Mesopotamia to serve their country during the First World War shared many of the same cultural references as the travellers, archaeologists and journalists who had come before them, but they encountered Mesopotamia and its peoples under fundamentally altered circumstances. The men and women who had sought Mesopotamia out in the early twentieth century had done so of their own volition. Their trips were often difficult and their journeys sometimes fraught with danger, but they were ultimately carried out for pleasure. In Donald Maxwell's record of the time he spent in Mesopotamia, *A Dweller in Mesopotamia: Being the Adventures of an Official Artist in the Garden of Eden*, he reflected that:

To have travelled in the land where Sennacherib held sway, to have walked upon the Sacred Way in Babylon, to have stood in the great banquet hall of Belshazzar's palace when the twilight is raising ghosts and [...] to wander in the moonlight into narrow streets in Old Baghdad, with its recollections of the *Arabian Nights*: these things are to make enduring pictures in the Palace of Memory.¹⁷⁴

It is difficult to differentiate Maxwell's wartime impressions of Mesopotamia from those of the travellers, writers and archaeologists who had come before him. Like them, his focus was on the importance of Mesopotamia's past and, like them, he identified Mesopotamia as the land of the *Arabian Nights*. But Maxwell's recollections are tinged with nostalgia for his romantic vision of Mesopotamia during the war, which is not to be found in the impressions of the travellers and commentators of the pre-war years. The nostalgia of the travellers of the early twentieth century had been for the grandeur of ancient Mesopotamia or for the primeval peace that they had found in the desert, never for Mesopotamia in its contemporary state.

Enquire into the Operation of War in Mesopotamia. Reports.etc. Report Together with a Separate Report by J. Wedgwood, and Appendices (London: H.M.S.O, 1917), p.8.

¹⁷⁴ Donald Maxwell, *A Dweller in Mesopotamia: Being the Adventures of an Official War Artist in the Garden of Eden* (London: John Lane, 1921), pp. vii-viii.

But during Maxwell's time in a land that had been characterised by the travellers that had come before him as frozen in its development – a living museum of its own history – Mesopotamia would undergo a period of modernisation and change. Wartime pressures would bring modern technology, railways and power stations, and an Indian-style administration that began to transform Mesopotamia. This chapter will trace British perceptions of Mesopotamia as it changed from an exotic travel destination, which was familiar because it was seen as a living illustration from the pages of the Old Testament or childhood editions of the *Arabian Nights*, to a battlefield of the First World War.¹⁷⁵

The Mesopotamian Campaign

Indian Expeditionary Force D was the fourth contingent of Indian troops sent to help the British war effort. Force A had been deployed to France, and Forces B and C had been sent to East Africa. The Viceroy of India, Lord Hardinge of Penshurst, reluctantly authorised the despatch of part of the 6th (Poona) Division in October 1914. The Ottoman Empire had yet to enter the war, and Hardinge was wary of any action that might suggest to the Muslim population of India that Britain was looking for a confrontation with the Caliph; he was also afraid that troop levels in India itself were being depleted to dangerously low levels.¹⁷⁶ Despite these concerns, the 16th Brigade of the 6th Division, led by Major-General Delamain, reached Bahrain in October and, once war with Turkey had been declared, in November 1914, Delamain and his men landed on the Persian island of Fao.

Delamain's orders were to protect the British Government's investment in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company by securing its pipeline at Abadan, in Persia. He was also to maintain good relations with local Arab leaders and, as the prime minister, Herbert Asquith, put it in his announcement to the House of Commons, 'generally to

¹⁷⁵ Kathryn Tidrick, *Heart Beguiling Araby: The English Romance with Arabia* [1981] (London: I.B. Tauris, 1989), p.36. Tidrick describes the affinity nineteenth-century travellers felt for Arabia in these terms.

¹⁷⁶ See Lord Hardinge's evidence and other documents presented to the Mesopotamia Commission: e.g. L/MIL/17/15/65/3 and Lord Hardinge's memoirs: Lord Hardinge of Penshurst, *My Indian Year 1910-1916: The Reminiscences of Lord Hardinge of Penhurst* (London: John Murrey, 1948), p. 102.

maintain the authority of our flag in the East'.¹⁷⁷ Later that month, General Sir Arthur Barrett arrived in the Gulf with a further two brigades; under his command, IEF D captured the Mesopotamian port of Basra in November 1914, and by December they had occupied Qurna, further north on the Tigris. In April 1915, General Sir John Nixon took command of IEF D and, later that month, Major-General Charles Townshend arrived in Mesopotamia to take charge of the 6th Division. Under Nixon's command, IEF D captured the towns of Amara, Nasiriyah and Kut-al-Amara by September 1915. In October, Nixon sent a telegram informing his superiors that he was ready to 'open the road to Baghdad'.¹⁷⁸

The period between the first arrival of British troops in the Gulf in 1914 and Townshend's advance to Kut in September 1915 was a remarkably successful one for the relatively small and ill-equipped force. Townshend and his troops had been particularly successful; the 6th Division had been responsible for many of IEF D's advances after April 1915. With the help of the Royal Navy in amphibious attacks, they had captured all but Nasiriyeh. By October that year, it was Townshend's troops that had reached Aziziyah, and their advance to Baghdad being debated in London and Simla.

First impressions of Mesopotamia

Despite the initial success enjoyed by British and Indian troops in this early period, the campaign in Mesopotamia was perceived as irrelevant to the final outcome of the war: 'the beginning of a side-show', as Reginald Campbell Thompson, then a Captain in the Indian Political Service in Basra, titled this chapter of his

¹⁷⁷ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, British Library, London. L/MIL/17/15/65/6, Appendix 33, *Questions in Parliament*, p. 3.

¹⁷⁸ For a more detailed analysis of the military history of the Mesopotamian campaign see for example: A. J. Barker, *The Neglected War: Mesopotamia 1914-1918* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967); Paul K. Davis, *Ends and Means: The Mesopotamian Campaign and Commission* (London: Associated University Presses, 1992); F.J. Moberly, *The Campaign in Mesopotamia, 1914-1918*, History of the Great War Based on Official Documents, 4 vols (London: H.M.S.O, 1923-27); Ron Wilcox, *Battles on the Tigris* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 2006).

unpublished wartime memoir, *With the Intelligence to Baghdad*.¹⁷⁹ Some, like Captain Harold Dickson, resented their despatch to Mesopotamia and tried hard to secure a posting on the Western Front, where they believed the war would ultimately be decided. Whilst still in Britain, Dickson wrote to his mother complaining that he was 'sick to death' that his efforts to remain in Europe had proved unsuccessful.¹⁸⁰ Dickson, of the 29th Lancers, would later join the political service and make a career for himself in the Middle East, but in August 1914, having 'used up all [his] efforts in the past week to try and get a job in Belgium', he reluctantly set off for India.¹⁸¹ Once he knew that he was on his way to the Persian Gulf, he looked forward to what he hoped would turn out to be a 'big show' and the possibility of the capture of Baghdad.¹⁸² Despite these early hopes, Dickson's knowledge of Arabic and the fact that he knew 'heaps, having read a great deal about it',¹⁸³ he wrote home to his mother in December 1914 that he and his men were 'longing to get to France'.¹⁸⁴

Dickson was by no means alone in his desire to be on the Western Front. Vice-Admiral Wilfred Nunn captained the *Espiègle* (one of the crafts that accompanied IEF D during this phase of the campaign). In his memoir, *Tigris Gunboats*, Nunn recalled that 'to be in the East at the time was a disappointment to all in the Force. Most of the soldiers were wishing themselves in France'.¹⁸⁵ By February 1915, despite the continuing success of the Mesopotamian campaign, Harold Dickson's feelings had not changed. In a letter home he again explained his resentment:

I wish we could all get transferred in a body to France. I know we are doing our little bit for the empire here, but one naturally wants to be at the heart of things. The Germans are going to take a lot of beating.¹⁸⁶

For Dickson, at this time, the only positive aspect of the campaign was that he and his men were doing their 'little bit for the empire'. This description did not reflect the level

¹⁷⁹ R. Campbell Thompson, *With the Intelligence to Baghdad* By R. Campbell Thompson Sometime Captain, SSO GHQ Intelligence IEFD, 'The First World War Memoir of Captain R.C. Thompson'. I.W.M. Docs., London. Catalogue number: PP/MCR/424, Microfilm. (Hereafter Thompson)

¹⁸⁰ Lt. Col. (then Captain) Harold Richard Patrick Dickson, Middle East Centre Archives, St Antony's College, Oxford. M/S letters, GB165-0085, Box 1, File 3A, 21 August 1914. (Hereafter Dickson)

¹⁸¹ Dickson, 21 August 1914.

¹⁸² Dickson, 10 November 1914.

¹⁸³ Dickson, 10 November 1914.

¹⁸⁴ Dickson, 19 December 1914.

¹⁸⁵ Vice-Admiral Wilfred Nunn C.B., C.S.I., C.M.G., D.S.O., *Tigris Gunboats: A Narrative of the Royal Navy's Co-operation with the Military Forces in Mesopotamia from the Beginning of the War to the Capture of Baghdad (1914-17)* (London: Andrew Melrose, 1932), p. 10.

¹⁸⁶ Dickson, 17 February 1915.

of sacrifice being offered by Dickson or his troops; these men had volunteered to serve their country in the 'Great War' and were risking their lives, often under very difficult circumstances; these were not insignificant contributions to the war effort. Harold Dickson's comments highlight the fact that this seemed a very great sacrifice in a theatre of war that was not perceived by the men fighting it as relevant to Britain's ultimate victory. It was difficult for him to see that this was a justifiable use of precious manpower and resources when the 'real war' on the Western Front showed no signs of a quick Allied victory. Dickson did not only wish that he, personally, could be sent to France, but also that the troops in Mesopotamia 'could all get transferred in a body to France'; he simply did not believe that Mesopotamia as a theatre of war was a worthwhile investment of manpower or resources.

These sentiments continued to be expressed throughout the campaign. Major-General Ladislaus Richard Pope-Hennessy arrived in Mesopotamia in September 1916 to take up his post as the Commanding Officer of the 1st Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. Still reeling from the shock of the surrender of the garrison at Kut, Pope-Hennessy wrote home to his wife that 'no dead Turk brings the end of the war nearer, while a dead German means a fraction of a minute off the duration of the war'.¹⁸⁷ This was one of the fundamental problems of the campaign in Mesopotamia: many of those who were sent to serve there did not perceive it as a worthwhile theatre of war, and the Ottoman Empire was not perceived to be the real enemy. Articles in the British press even suggested that the Ottomans were essentially German puppets, or that Turkey had been tricked into entering the war by Germany.¹⁸⁸ This inevitably made it more difficult for those men and women to endure the difficulties that they confronted in Mesopotamia.

Unlike Dickson, Reginald Campbell-Thompson had requested a commission somewhere where his knowledge of Arabic could be put to use. The title he gave his chapter may not have reflected his personal feelings about the Mesopotamian campaign, but rather the general impression of the campaign in Mesopotamia.¹⁸⁹ Even when British servicemen did not resent their despatch to

¹⁸⁷ Private Papers of L H R Pope-Hennessy C.B., D.S.O., I.W.M. Docs., London. Catalogue number: 12641 03/35/1, 2 September 1916, p. 108. (Hereafter Pope-Hennessy).

¹⁸⁸ See for example: 'Turkey Enters the Fray', *The Times*, 30 October, 1914, p.9.; 'Turkey's Mistake', *Manchester Guardian*, 2 November 1914, p. 6.

¹⁸⁹ Thompson, p. 7.

Mesopotamia, they were plagued by the knowledge that the Mesopotamian campaign was badly understood and, consequently, little appreciated by people at home. The British media published brief notices of IEF D's achievements as the force made its way north, but not until Townshend's ill-fated advance towards Baghdad did they devote very much space to longer commentary on its progress. Understandably, the Western Front featured far more prominently in media coverage of the war; yet often the coverage of the Gallipoli campaign or of the protection of the Suez Canal was also more detailed than that of the early stages of the Mesopotamian campaign. The latter was, as a report in the *Nation* in December 1915 indicated, perceived as 'subsidiary to the operations in the main theatre of war'.¹⁹⁰ Servicemen often commented on the lack of media coverage of their campaign, viewing this as confirmation that they were, as A. J. Barker put it in his history of the campaign, 'the forgotten Army of the First World War'.¹⁹¹

In one letter published in the *Manchester Guardian* in May 1915, an 'Englishman in the Persian Gulf' complained to his mother 'that the home papers publish no news at all of the Persian and Mesopotamian fighting'.¹⁹² He wrote that the lack of media coverage was particularly 'hard on the troops engaged, who have done splendidly in a peculiarly wicked country'.¹⁹³ The *Manchester Guardian* gave the campaign more coverage than most papers, publishing a small number of letters home from Mesopotamia, such as this one, and other occasional articles on the campaign. Nevertheless, in common with most British publications, the majority of its coverage was limited to brief updates of IEF D's progress. Harold Dickson, too, complained in letters home to his mother that 'the papers we see scarcely mention anything of the doings of our forces here. Nor are our casualties even printed in one list, they appear to be purposely spread out over many days'.¹⁹⁴ As the anonymous serviceman's letter indicates, this was particularly difficult to bear when those serving in Mesopotamia believed that they were serving under especially difficult conditions in 'a peculiarly wicked country'.

¹⁹⁰ 'The Story of the Baghdad Campaign', *Nation*, 11 December 1915, p. 378.

¹⁹¹ Barker, pp. 17-18.

¹⁹² 'Mesopotamia Campaign - A German Plot at Bushire', *Manchester Guardian*, 20 May 1915, p.12.

¹⁹³ 'Mesopotamia Campaign - A German Plot at Bushire', *Manchester Guardian*, 20 May 1915, p.12.

¹⁹⁴ Dickson, 7 September 1915.

Servicemen felt neglected not only by the lack of interest shown by the British media, but by the scarcity of resources – and consequent discomfort – they experienced in Mesopotamia. Lord Hardinge described the Mesopotamian campaign to the Mesopotamia Commission in 1916 as ‘the “Cinderella” of all the expeditions’; he attributed this to the fact that ‘the late secretary for war [Kitchener] did not take an interest in any expedition for which he was not himself more or less responsible’.¹⁹⁵ William Bird was a private in the 2nd Battalion Dorsetshire Regiment (16th Indian Infantry Brigade, 6th Poona Division); his diary of the first weeks he spent in Mesopotamia is dominated by the scarcity of food. He often recorded his hunger; upon arrival at Basra in November 1914, Bird recalled: ‘we were so hungry that my chum Rusty Hellard and I went and bought one rupee of Arab chapattis and eight annas of dates, and we sat down and ate the lot and they seemed beautiful to us’.¹⁹⁶ By December that year, Bird noted that ‘the food now is improving although there is not enough. Sometimes we have to cut cards to see who’s to have certain things’.¹⁹⁷

Harold Dickson wrote home that he and his troops were ‘suffering a good deal of hardships’:

Heat is fearful & we have no tents whatsoever. Not a particle of shade in the shape of trees and bushes. It is a real hard time we are having. We have been a week on the march & our supply question got more of a problem as we go on. We are not exactly on short ration, but we are on hard fare. NO sugar, bully beef, no milk, no lime juice, no vegetables at all. Dirty water to drink (pea soup). If only heat would subside. To cap our trial[s] we have a howling hot wind blowing all day raising one big dust storm from morn till night.’¹⁹⁸

In annotations to the war diary of the 28th Field Battery, 9th Brigade, Meerut Division, Royal Field Artillery captain H.B. Latham, who arrived in Basra in November 1915, wrote of the ‘appalling’ conditions he and his colleagues endured.¹⁹⁹ Latham complained of the rain that ‘seemed to be never ending’ but also of the scarcity of food supplies.²⁰⁰ He noted that ‘the men in the trenches and in the [unreadable] line

¹⁹⁵ Archives of Mesopotamia Commission, British Library, London. L/MIL/17/15/65/3, Statement by Lord Hardinge of Penshurst, p. 786.

¹⁹⁶ Private Papers of W R Bird, I.W.M. Docs. Catalogue Number: 828 88/7/1, 21 November 1914. (Hereafter, Bird). See also diary entries for: 8 November 1914; 15 November 1914 and 20 November 1914.

¹⁹⁷ Bird, 4 December 1914.

¹⁹⁸ Dickson, no date.

¹⁹⁹ M/S Appendices by H.B. Latham cited in: Private Papers of J Coombey, I.W.M. Docs. Catalogue Number: 9720 P374, Appendix 1. (Hereafter Latham).

²⁰⁰ Latham, Appendix 1.

had the best luck - as food was more plentiful there - but even there - with one tin of "Bully" amongst five officers for luncheon, one used to watch automatically how much the others took'.²⁰¹ Under such circumstances, it is not difficult to imagine why so many British servicemen thought Mesopotamia was 'a loathsome county'.²⁰²

Not all those serving in Mesopotamia had to endure the hardships Bird, Dickson and others described. St John Philby, serving as a political officer in Basra, noted in his memoirs that he and his colleagues 'often attended one or other of the local music-halls to hear the singing of Olga, Marcia and other popular artistes originating from Aleppo'.²⁰³ Philby recalled dining lavishly at the officers' mess on wine and other luxury supplies left behind by German troops, and reflected that 'it was sometimes difficult to think that we had anything to do with the war that was going on up-river'.²⁰⁴

Gertrude Bell, who arrived in Mesopotamia in 1915, and the wives of political officers were the only British women in Mesopotamia for the first two years of the campaign, as nurses were only sent to Mesopotamia in 1916. Many of these women, such as Belle Cox, wife of the Chief Political Officer and later British High Commissioner in Baghdad, Sir Percy Cox, seem to have left no record of their experience Mesopotamia. However, Emily Lorimer [née Overend], who had accompanied her husband David Lockhart Lorimer to Mesopotamia, left a record of her time as political officer's wife and, later, editor of the British Government Press publication, the *Basrah Times*.²⁰⁵

Lorimer was an accomplished linguist who attained first-class honours degrees in French and German from the Royal University of Ireland and Somerville College, Oxford, where she taught Germanic philology until her marriage. Her letters home, which were a mixture of private letters and 'family diaries' intended for circulation to many family members, described a very different world from that experienced by the majority of British and Indian troops, especially those serving outside Basra. Particularly before her editorship of the *Basrah Times*, Lorimer's letters

²⁰¹ Latham, Appendix 1.

²⁰² Humphrey de Verd Leigh, IWM Sound Archive, London. Accession No: 37.

²⁰³ H St J. B. Philby, *Arabian Days: An Autobiography* (London: Robert Hale, 1948), p.96.

²⁰⁴ Philby, p. 98.

²⁰⁵ See Emily Lorimer's papers at the British Library, London: IOR: MSS EUR F 177 (Henceforth Lorimer). For more detail on Lorimer's life and time in the Middle East: Penelope Tuson, *Playing the Game: The Story of Western Women in Arabia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), chapters 2 and 4.

to her mother are full of requests, and thanks, for fashionable clothes and details of her busy social life. Her correspondence also reveals that it was only a privileged few in Basra who lived in relative luxury:

We have been having the most terrific weather, wind and heavy rain and the whole place is a swamp; it is pretty bad even for the people down here at the base who are in tents or huts; one officer who came in yest. told us that that the entire hut in wh. he is living was flooded a foot or so with nice thick mud; they had to take spades and literally dig out their blankets. But if it is bad for them it must be 20 times worse for the unfortunate troops in the field.²⁰⁶

As these comments indicate, Lorimer was aware that regardless of any discomforts she might have endured as a result of the Mesopotamian climate or people (whom she found dirty and vulgar), she lived in relative luxury. She was particularly aware of the hardships faced by men outside of Basra, because she worried constantly about the welfare of her husband, and wrote regularly to her mother that she would have foregone all of her comforts in Basra to be able to live closer to him.

As Lorimer's concluding comments indicate, things were much worse for those serving in the field. It is unsurprising, considering the vast difference of experience between those stationed in Basra and those who served elsewhere in Mesopotamia, that Dickson wrote home that he had seen 'with huge amusement' the statement by the secretary of state for India, Austen Chamberlain, 'that we were all getting ice, soda water, electric fans etc etc'.²⁰⁷ Like the anonymous serviceman published in the *Manchester Guardian*, Dickson complained that such a misleading statement 'isn't really cricket [...] as the vast majority of our army is far north of Basra living under the hardest of conditions'.²⁰⁸ It was difficult enough for servicemen to endure the hardships of war: the harsh Mesopotamian climate, the scarcity of food and other supplies, and the difficult relationship between British forces and the population of Mesopotamia. But many servicemen felt that their contribution to the war effort was simply not appreciated back home and, like Harold Dickson, wanted 'people at home to realize a bit what we are experiencing'.²⁰⁹

Regardless of the level of comfort in which they lived, or the period during which they arrived in Mesopotamia, British servicemen, nurses, journalists and

²⁰⁶ Lorimer, 22 January 1916, p.1. Lorimer's emphasis.

²⁰⁷ Dickson, 7 September 1915.

²⁰⁸ Dickson, 7 September 1915.

²⁰⁹ Dickson, 7 September 1915

other commentators were united in their hatred of the Mesopotamian climate. As Humphrey de Verd Leigh, who was an officer of the Royal Naval Air Service Seaplane Squadron in Mesopotamia in 1916 recalled, in the spring and summer Mesopotamia was 'beastly hot'.²¹⁰ Donald Maxwell described the region far more romantically and favourably than many of his contemporaries. Nevertheless, he reflected that 'there is an unenviable competition between places situated in the region of Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf as to which can be the hottest'.²¹¹ Lieutenant-Colonel Tennent of the Royal Flying Corps noted in his memoir, *In the Clouds Above Baghdad*, that Mesopotamia was:

Famous at least for its climate; the humid heat hangs heavy on the lungs, everything is saturated, ink runs on the paper, and the matches will barely strike. Endure the day, but the night brings no relief. There is no freshness in a Busrah summer, and the ravages of prickly heat, mosquito, and sand-fly combine to shrivel all impulse and desire.²¹²

Tennent's description of the climate in Mesopotamia was typical of reactions to the heat throughout the campaign. This combined with seasonal flooding to bring an oppressive humidity and insects (particularly sand flies, which spread disease among the men), making Mesopotamia, as Harold Dickson noted, 'a bad country for troops'.²¹³

Dickson referred to the Mesopotamian summer as 'the unhealthy season', writing to his mother in mid-February 1915 that, even at that time of the year, 'the heat is coming on' and 'the country is getting flooded everywhere, vast marshes of some hundreds of miles are appearing, [...] & the mosquitos [sic] are making their appearance'.²¹⁴ Private Berry, who served as driver with Royal Field Artillery in Mesopotamia, recalled Mesopotamia as a country of 'terrific heat' filled with 'sand flies [...] centipedes and scorpions'; he remembered with some amusement 'many Indian troops collapsing with the heat there; even they couldn't stand it so I don't know what they expected us to do about it. [Laughs] For some men the heat proved

²¹⁰ Leigh.

²¹¹ Maxwell, p. 12.

²¹² John Edward Tennent, *In the Clouds Above Baghdad: Being the Records of an Air Commander [...]* (London: Cecil Palmer, 1920), p. 10.

²¹³ Dickson, 17 February 1915.

²¹⁴ Dickson, 17 February 1915

too much to bear'.²¹⁵ Berry recollected that two of his drivers 'could stand no more, next we knew they just blew their brains out, they couldn't take any more [...]. It was sad to us of course, it's probably off the record, but it's quite true'.²¹⁶ Captain Thompson reflected wryly on Tennyson's oft-quoted poem:

If it be the accursed heat of summer one sweats thinking with desiccated humour of Tennyson's prince and his silly verse, how many a sheeny summer morn he was borne past the highwalled gardens of Baghdad, pleurably, we are to suppose: if winter, one shivers in the winds that sweep over the bistre landscape.²¹⁷

The men who served in Mesopotamia during the First World War had very little patience for romantic images of the region, such as that offered by Tennyson, which had dominated pre-war descriptions of Mesopotamia. While David Fraser had revelled in Tennyson's verse as he approached Baghdad less than ten years earlier, for Thompson the idea that one might be able to enjoy a 'summer morn' anywhere in Mesopotamia was ridiculous.

As Thompson's memoir indicates, there was no relief to be found in the Mesopotamian winters, which were cold and wet and offered hardships of a different kind. When Mesopotamia was not described as unbearably hot and humid, it was described as extremely cold and muddy. The mud caused no end of trouble for British servicemen, and many came to despise it and the country that had inflicted it upon them. Emily Lorimer's description of the mud was very typical: it was an all-pervading plague that seemed to get everywhere and stick to everything. Major Alexander Anderson, later Sir Alexander Anderson, was a major commanding the Volunteer Artillery Battery, which was one of the units that would take part in Townshend's attempt to capture Baghdad, and was besieged at Kut. In his diary of the time he spent in Mesopotamia, Anderson wrote that 'no one who has not experienced Mesopotamian mud can have any conception of what it is like. It is unique'.²¹⁸ He described it as a substance that 'sticks to your feet and makes them heavy as lead and is slippery like ice to walk on, so that it takes your utmost care to avoid falling and you feel glued to the spot you are on'.²¹⁹ Pope-Hennessy recorded that his 'camp [was]

²¹⁵ Private T. Berry, IWM Sound Archive, London. Accession code: 4019, my transcript.

²¹⁶ Berry.

²¹⁷ Thompson, p. 42.

²¹⁸ Major Sir Alexander Anderson, 'The Kut Diary of Major Alexander Anderson', IWM Documents, London. Catalogue Number: P129/AJA1, p. 56. (Hereafter Anderson)

²¹⁹ Anderson, p. 56.

ankle deep in sticky mud’ and concluded: ‘I don’t think I have ever hated anything so much on earth as I hate this country’.²²⁰ Even Gertrude Bell, who was familiar with Mesopotamia and extremely fond of the country, wrote home in March 1916 that she had walked home ‘in imminent peril of a mud bath at every step’ because ‘when it rained walking in Basrah became a real feat of athletics, the roads being composed wholly of the constituents of pure mud’.²²¹

Though mud is most often associated with the experiences of soldiers serving on the Western Front, it also dominated the lives of those who were sent to serve in Mesopotamia. In a series titled ‘Campaigning in the Mud – Trials of British soldiers in Many Lands’, the *Manchester Guardian* published a letter from ‘Sergeant A. Kingdom 2nd battalion Norfolk regiment, to his mother at Thetford’.²²² From their disembarkation ‘in mud and water’, the lives of Kingdom and the men he served with were plagued by the Mesopotamian mud.²²³ He wrote home that he and his men ‘marched all the next day through mud. [They] lay in the wet mud on the desert all night, and moved away early again in the morning, to find the enemy in position’.²²⁴ Like Anderson, Kingdom was most struck by the operational difficulties that the mud caused. He described how ‘rifles were absolutely choked inside with mud, and the bolt action and sights had to be made to work before an accurate fire could be effected’.²²⁵ Some men resorted to using their precious water supplies to clean their rifles, despite the fact that ‘water is so scarce and slush worth a gold piece an ounce’.²²⁶ In another letter published in the *Manchester Guardian*, ‘An Englishman in the Persian Gulf’ told his mother that ‘no story of the mud is exaggerated. It couldn’t be’.²²⁷ He described watching:

A mule corps coming in when it was impossible to tell where a man began and mule ended. They were like a herd of centaurs carved out of Clay. I have seen Indian troops that could not be told from white troops, they were so caked

²²⁰ Pope-Hennessy, p. 292.

²²¹ Gertrude Bell, Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University Library, Newcastle. Letter dated 11 March 1916 <http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=159> [accessed 19 April 2010].

²²² ‘Campaigning in the Mud’, *Manchester Guardian*, 15 January 1915, p. 4.

²²³ ‘Campaigning in the Mud’, *Manchester Guardian*.

²²⁴ ‘Campaigning in the Mud’, *Manchester Guardian*.

²²⁵ ‘Campaigning in the Mud’, *Manchester Guardian*.

²²⁶ ‘Campaigning in the Mud’, *Manchester Guardian*.

²²⁷ ‘Mesopotamia Campaign’, *Manchester Guardian*.

with mud dried white in the sun, guns that might be ambulance wagons, and wagons that might be mud forts.²²⁸

The men who served in Mesopotamia were convinced that theirs was the worst lot. Not only did they have to serve in a country that they hated in terrible conditions, but they did so in a theatre of war that Lord Curzon described as 'secondary' in the House of Commons.²²⁹

It was only later, as troops were sent to Mesopotamia from the Western Front and other theatres, that servicemen in Mesopotamia felt that others began to appreciate quite how difficult their task in Mesopotamia had been. Some recently arrived men like Lieutenant Malcolm Murray Thornburn of 2nd Battalion, Black Watch, who arrived in Mesopotamia in January 1916, wrote that 'those who have experienced war in France do not know what war is'.²³⁰ Emily Lorimer recorded the reaction of recently arrived troops in January 1916 in her letters to her family:

We had very heavy rain last week wh. turned the whole place into a swamp and must have impeded our troops very much; however, the ground is drying up again now. Many of the new tro[o]ps have come out here from France, and were inclined beforehand to think they were coming to a picnic sort of warfare; they say that France is a picnic compared to this.²³¹

The horror stories of men drowning in mud on the Western Front were yet to take place in January 1916. Although their lot may not actually have been the hardest, those who fought in Mesopotamia were always plagued by the fact that the hardships they suffered were endured in a theatre of war that would always be considered 'subsidiary'.

In an interview for the sound archive at the Imperial War Museum, General (then Lieutenant) Henry Hampton Rich, who served in the 120th Rajputana Infantry, was asked why he believed that the siege of Kut was still not well understood or documented. Rich told his interviewer that this was obvious: 'it was a complete small side show [...]. It was worth nothing, it didn't matter what happened to us.'²³² It was this perception of the Mesopotamian campaign – expressed by those serving in Mesopotamia as well as by the contemporary media and modern histories of the war –

²²⁸ 'Mesopotamia Campaign', *Manchester Guardian*.

²²⁹ 'House of Lords', *Manchester Guardian*, April 21 1915, p. 4.

²³⁰ Private Papers of M. M. Thornburn, I.W.M. Docs., Catalogue Number: 511 88/56/1 (P), p. 83. (Hereafter: Thornburn).

²³¹ Lorimer, 13 January 1916.

²³² General Henry Hampton Rich, IWM Sound Archive, London. Accession Code: 766. My transcript.

that made the hardships of war in Mesopotamia so difficult for British servicemen and women to endure.

British travellers to Mesopotamia in the early twentieth century identified Mesopotamia as the land of the *Arabian Nights* and the setting for many of the stories of the Old Testament. Those who were sent to Mesopotamia during the First World War also identified Mesopotamia with these familiar tropes. Donald Maxwell's memoirs suggested that even those servicemen who did not make the link between Mesopotamia and these familiar ideas could not escape the connection because:

The natives have got up, in a most superficial way, the things which they think will interest the Englishman. Every group of palm trees more than twenty in number is pointed out as the Garden of Eden, every bump of ground more than six feet high is the mount on which the Ark rested, and every building more than fifty years old is the one undoubted and authentic residence of Sinbad the Sailor.²³³

For most British servicemen Mesopotamia was a terrible place to be sent to fight, made all the worse because it was supposed to be the mythical land of the *Arabian Nights* or – all the more ironic to British men and women struggling to survive its climate – the Garden of Eden.

In his 1969 history of the siege of Kut, *The Siege*, Russell Braddon suggests that the contrast between 'a mud hut village huddled round an open space from the centre of which grew the stump of an ancient tree' and servicemen's preconception of what the Tree of Knowledge should really have looked like 'shocked' British servicemen, who were offended by the Arab attempt to pass it off as the genuine article.²³⁴ Braddon argued that it was this kind of behaviour, which ensured that 'the British regular detested Mesopotamia'.²³⁵ His conclusions draw attention to the gap between what pre-war accounts of Mesopotamia had led Britons to expect of the 'land between the rivers', and its reality in the early-twentieth-century. It is in the gap between expectations and reality that the resentment expressed by these servicemen and women began to fester into loathing.

References to the *Arabian Nights* and to Mesopotamia as the Garden of Eden were common: Qurna, on the Tigris, was rumoured to be the actual site of the

²³³ Maxwell, p. 22.

²³⁴ Russell Braddon, *The Siege* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 19.

²³⁵ Braddon, p. 19.

Garden, which caused outrage and disbelief in the servicemen who were stationed there. Margery Thomas, a nurse who arrived in Mesopotamia after surrender of the garrison at Kut, recalled in her memoirs ‘that Kurna is supposed to be the site of the Garden of Eden’ and that ‘a soldier in the Dorset [regiment] is reputed to have said: “If this is the Garden of Eden, it wouldn’t have needed an angel with a flaming sword to keep me out of it!”’²³⁶ Similar anecdotes pepper many accounts of British servicemen’s experiences of Mesopotamia. Dorina Neave recounts this same story in her history of the siege of Kut, *Remembering Kut: Lest We Forget!*²³⁷

Colonel Frederick Sadleir Brereton’s novel of the Mesopotamian campaign, *On the Road to Baghdad*, introduces Mesopotamia and its peoples to a young readership as ‘a nasty place, up north of the Persian Gulf – heat – mosquitoes – Arabs’.²³⁸ *On the Road to Baghdad* is a boys’ adventure story that follows two young subalterns of the Indian Army, Geoff and Phil, on their adventures from the hill stations of India to their posting in Mesopotamia during the 1915 advance to Baghdad. Amidst the adventures with natives and brushes with death that the genre calls for, *On the Road to Baghdad* follows the events of the actual Mesopotamian campaign very closely. Brereton’s characters often voice the opinions that actual servicemen and women espoused. Upon his arrival at Qurna, Philip comments: “Garden of Eden Indeed! [...] Where’s the garden?”²³⁹ This was typical of reactions to Qurna, and to Mesopotamia more generally; Brereton’s narrator goes on to explain why:

And well might Phil have turned up his nose, have scoffed, and have shown the most infinite displeasure, for rains had set in since the occupation of Kurnah, and the whole country-side was soaked. That smooth, sandy and gravelly desert was covered a foot deep in sticky, sandy, mud different from any mud encountered elsewhere; mud which clung to the boots, which piled up on the feet of those who trudged about the camp, and who must needs carry about with them so much extra weight.²⁴⁰

The description the narrator gives of the Mesopotamian mud is almost exactly like that given by Alexander Anderson: it was a unique substance that stuck to everything and weighed down troops, so that they were effectively carrying an extra load. Moreover, Philip’s attitude towards Mesopotamia as the supposed site of the Garden of Eden

²³⁶ Private Papers of M.A.A. Thomas, IWM Docs. London. Catalogue Number: 3734 85/39/1, p. 177.

²³⁷ Dorina L. Neave, *Remembering Kut: Lest We Forget!* (London: Arthur Barker Ltd, 1937), p. 11.

²³⁸ Frederick Sadleir Brereton, *On the Road to Baghdad: A Story of the British Expeditionary Force in Mesopotamia, etc.* [1916](London: Blackie & Son, 1917), p. 19-20.

²³⁹ Brereton, *On the Road to Baghdad*, p. 232.

²⁴⁰ Brereton, *On the Road to Baghdad*, p. 232.

mirrors that adopted by many British servicemen. The extremes of heat and cold, mud and rain, or a sun that was dangerously strong, made Mesopotamia a very difficult place in which to fight. But the incongruence between these conditions and the Garden of Eden, in particular, seemed to make Mesopotamia almost too difficult to bear. Like Philip, most British servicemen stationed in the southern regions of Mesopotamia resentfully concluded: “‘Garden Indeed!’ The place was a muddy swamp, set amidst the most depressing surroundings’.”²⁴¹

Discourses of Race and Civilization

Discourses of race and civilization were central to the ways in which the campaign was perceived by British men and women in Mesopotamia during the First World War. They also figured prominently in contemporary and subsequent representations of the campaign in the British media, histories and memoirs of the campaign, and fictional representations of war-time Mesopotamia. It is impossible to understand the ways in which British servicemen perceived the Mesopotamian campaign without reference to ‘biological’ or ‘scientific’ theories of race, which assumed that human beings could be split into distinct and unchanging races, each of which had its own particular traits, morals and characteristics.

In part, the prominence of race in British perceptions of Mesopotamia during the First World War can be linked to the centrality of concepts of race in the recruitment practices and perceptions of the Indian and British Armies.²⁴² The theory of martial races – ‘the belief that some groups of men are biologically or culturally predisposed to the arts of war’²⁴³ – was central to the recruitment practices of the Indian Army, particularly after the 1880s when fears of Russian designs upon Britain’s Indian empire prompted changes to the recruitment strategy of the Indian Army.²⁴⁴ The martial races were believed to be located in northern provinces of India, such as

²⁴¹ Brereton, *On the Road to Baghdad*, p. 233.

²⁴² Heather Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 88.

²⁴³ Heather Streets, p. 1.

²⁴⁴ David Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860-1940* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press in association with King’s College, London, 1994), pp. 11-12 and Streets, pp. 88-93.

the Punjab and Nepal, where it was believed that the cooler climate had helped to make men hardier and more warlike. George MacMunn described the martial races as 'largely the product of the original white races', which were believed to have come to India and brought with them the indo-European language Sanskrit.²⁴⁵ The provinces populated with martial races were also those that had put up the hardest resistance to British control. Conversely, men from the more southern provinces – particularly Bengal – were thought to be the least martial: they were believed to have been made lazy by the heat and feminised by their desire for western learning.

The Indian Rebellion of 1857 led the Indian Army to adopt a recruitment strategy based on the idea of 'balance'; in an effort to ensure that another mutiny could never again be possible, a policy of divide and rule led to a broad and heterogeneous recruitment of men from across India and from a range of different castes.²⁴⁶ However, fears of Russian expansion eastwards led the Indian army to adopt a new recruitment strategy in the late nineteenth century; men from the 'martial races' were sought in an effort to create the strongest possible force – one that would be able to defend India against a European foe. The pressures of wartime recruitment meant that men had to be sought from a wider spectrum, but David Omissi concludes that 'by 1914, about three-quarters of the Indian infantry came from the Punjab, Nepal or the North West Frontier Province'.²⁴⁷ The theory of martial races, therefore, continued to play an important role in the ways in which 'native' soldiers of the Indian Army were viewed by their British commanders in Mesopotamia and India.²⁴⁸

In his evidence before the Mesopotamia Commission in 1916, the Commander in Chief of the Indian Army, Sir Beauchamp Duff, explained that India had found it difficult to recruit soldiers for service in Mesopotamia because not all races were suitably martial. He agreed with the commissioners that 'you cannot get any really good fighters down South', and concluded that 'the Mahratta is the most southerly race that is really any good'.²⁴⁹ Though the commissioners questioned Duff

²⁴⁵ Lieut- General Sir George MacMunn K.C.B., K.C.S.I., D.S.O. Colonel Commandant of the Royal Artillery, *The Martial Races of India* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1933), p. 9.

²⁴⁶ For a more detailed discussion see David Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860-1940*, pp. 6-10 and Heather Streets, *Martial Races*, p. 93.

²⁴⁷ Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj*, p. 44.

²⁴⁸ On recruitment strategy during the war see Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj*, p. 44.

²⁴⁹ Mesopotamia Commission Archives, British Library, London. L/MIL/17/15/65/3, Evidence given by Sir Beauchamp Duff, p. 653.

on the suitability of other races in India for non-combatant service in the Indian army, none questioned his basic premise that some races were unsuitable for military service because they were simply not martial enough.

In the memoir of his time spent as viceroy of India, *My Indian Years*, Lord Hardinge reflected upon his visit to Mesopotamia in 1915; he recalled meeting the first Indian soldiers to win the Victoria Cross with great pride, and noted:

It was curious that the two Gharwali battalions composed of men who must originally have been a cross strain between Rajputs and Ghurkhas, and who were rather looked down upon in the Indian Army, fought the best.²⁵⁰

Hardinge sought to highlight the bravery and loyalty of the men whom he had met on his visit, but it is impossible to understand his compliment fully without placing it in the context of the theory of martial races. Describing the soldiers as a 'cross strain' evokes images of animal breeding or husbandry. Such language suggests an understanding of race rooted in biological or scientific theories of race.

Although race was seen as a trustworthy indicator of character, morals, fighting-ability and loyalty, it was not particularly well understood and often conflated with creed. This, too, may have had its roots in the Indian Army's recruitment practices, which identified Sikhs and Muslims as belonging to 'martial faiths', thus conflating race and faith.²⁵¹ Once it was decided that an Indian force was to be sent to the Gulf in anticipation of Ottoman hostilities, British officers had concerns about how the Muslim soldiers under their command would react to being sent to fight against their fellow Muslims: the Turks. Although not all of the Indian soldiers were Muslim, accounts – particularly of the siege of Kut – suggest that many British servicemen did not know enough about the differences in culture between Indian soldiers to understand, or to appreciate, that Hindu or Sikh soldiers would have had no loyalty either to the Caliph or to the Turks.

In his memoir, *My Campaign in Mesopotamia*, Charles Townshend wrote at length of the problems he encountered in dealing with his 'native' soldiers; in particular, he worried constantly about their loyalty without any regard for the differences between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. He complained that his Indian troops were weaker and less loyal than his British troops and recalled, for example, that in the

²⁵⁰ Baron Charles Hardinge of Penshurst, *My Indian Years, 1900-1906* (London: John Murray, 1948), p. 100.

²⁵¹ Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj*, p. 24.

aftermath of the retreat to Kut al-Amara, ‘the scarcity of British officers among the Indian battalions was a constant nightmare to me. [...] General Houghton told me that he could not answer for the safety of his sector of defence unless I removed the Indian battalion’.²⁵² Townshend’s account made no distinction among the ‘Indian soldiers’; to him they were all of doubtful loyalty. His comments suggest that General Houghton also did not distinguish between different creeds of Indian soldiers, treating them all as suspect.

General Sir Fenton Aylmer, who commanded the Tigris Relief Force’s initial attempts to relieve Kut between January and March 1916, also complained of the Indians under his command, sending a message to Townshend that he too had problems with the ‘want of moral’ [sic] in his ‘Indian troops’; ‘it is my handful of Norfolks, Dorsets, Oxfords who are my sheet-anchor here’, he wrote.²⁵³ Aylmer did not distinguish between the different creeds of Indian troops under his command, grouping them all as Indian and therefore inferior and lacking in ‘moral[e]’. He went on:

We do not want inferior drafts of Indian recruits from India, such as my battalions were filled up with after the battle of Kut-el-Amara, in September last. Mellis, Delamain, Hamilton and Houghton will bear me out in this. One or two good all-British divisions are what we want.

Now is the time to demand good white troops from overseas – an army corps to save and hold Mesopotamia, if the government considers it worth holding.²⁵⁴

Aylmer’s message outlined the ways in which many of the most senior commanders in Mesopotamia saw the men serving under them; if Aylmer’s message is to be believed, some of the most senior commanders in the field believed that Indian troops – no matter what creed - were inferior to ‘good all-British divisions’. It was this ‘inferiority’, rather than the terrible conditions under which the men under his command had attempted to break into the besieged garrison, on which Aylmer blamed his failure to relieve Kut. In Aylmer’s analysis of the situation, race was the most important factor, taking a central place in his assessment of both the performance of troops under his command thus far, and of what he would be able to achieve in the future.

²⁵² Major General Sir Charles V. F. Townshend K.C.B, D.S.O, *My Campaign in Mesopotamia* (London: Thornton Butterworth Ltd, 1920), p. 229.

²⁵³ Cited in Townshend, *My Campaign in Mesopotamia*, p. 263.

²⁵⁴ Cited in Townshend, *My Campaign in Mesopotamia*, p. 263.

Some soldiers serving in Mesopotamia were sympathetic to the hardships faced by their Indian colleagues but did not, or could not, distinguish between them in any sophisticated way. Aubrey Herbert was a Member of Parliament and keen traveller. He joined the Irish Guards in 1914, despite his poor eyesight, and spent much of the war in the Middle East, serving in Hogarth's Arab Bureau in Cairo, Gallipoli and Mesopotamia. His diary contains a conversation he had with an Irish officer who 'said that when the war broke out, he, and many like himself, saw the Mohammedan difficulty. They had themselves been ready to refuse to fight against Ulster; why should Indians fight the Turks?'.²⁵⁵ But even this officer, whose comments were remarkably sensitive, given the climate in which they were made, conflated 'Mohammedans' and Indians, treating them as one and the same. Herbert noted in his diary that 'Indians' ought not to have been sent to fight in Mesopotamia, 'on this ground, which to them is holy'.²⁵⁶ Here again race and creed are conflated.

Some British servicemen in Mesopotamia had a better understanding of the diversity of cultures and faiths in the 'native' regiments, but they did not have any real knowledge about the significance of these differences. Reginald Campbell Thompson recalled that in the misery of the retreat from Ctesiphon in December 1915, 'looking after the Indian wounded was a difficult business and I knew no Indian dialect'.²⁵⁷ Although his description of Indian languages as dialects reminds the modern reader that he was, in many ways, a product of the imperial ideologies of his day, Thompson was among the more racially aware officers in Mesopotamia. Although he knew very little about the Indian troops, he knew that there were differences between them and that those differences should be respected: 'I knew [...] that caste existed, and that to care for it was paramount'.²⁵⁸ Thompson recalled that they 'rigged up two or three rough fireplaces of bricks or stones on the iron decks of the barges, and then by enlisting the help of a magnificent old Indian officer, detailed men of the different castes to make the flat round bread'.²⁵⁹ Although the ships that carried the wounded Indian soldiers back down to Basra transported them in terrible conditions,

²⁵⁵ Aubrey Herbert, *Mons, Anzac and Kut: Experiences in the European War by an M.P.* (London: Edward Arnold, 1919), pp. 213-4.

²⁵⁶ Herbert, p. 208.

²⁵⁷ Thompson, p. 81.

²⁵⁸ Thompson, p. 81.

²⁵⁹ Thompson, p. 82.

Thompson's account suggests that some effort was made to ensure that they received the appropriate treatment, from men who spoke their languages.

David Omissi argues that the use of collective stereotypes gave the British in India an illusory sense of control and understanding of the native peoples they ruled: 'to predict a man's behaviour it was necessary to know only the collective attributes of the group to which he belonged'.²⁶⁰ Omissi maintains that 'in keeping with this attitude, the British often used the singular when referring to collective social entities' such as 'the Pallan'.²⁶¹ Collective stereotypes of this kind were also used in the same way by those trying to understand Mesopotamia during the campaign. As Chapter One illustrated, stereotypes about 'the Arab' or 'the Kurd' were in evidence long before the Mesopotamian campaign.

In February 1916, the British government took control of operations in Mesopotamia; from this point on, the Commander in Chief of the Indian Army (then Sir Beauchamp Duff) would receive his orders from the Chief of the Imperial General Staff. The main result of the change in leadership was financial, as more men and resources became available for the campaign. The British government issued two publications designed to inform British servicemen of the basic facts on Mesopotamian language, geography, history and peoples: *The Handbook of Mesopotamia* and *The Arab of Mesopotamia*.

The first of four volumes of *The Handbook of Mesopotamia* contained chapters on the 'Climate, Minerals, Fauna and Flora, History and Inhabitants' of Mesopotamia as well as a section of the 'transliteration of Arabic, Persian and Turkish' and useful vocabulary.²⁶² The handbook had sections devoted to 'Arabs and Kurds' that refer to 'the Arab' (always as 'he') or 'the Arabs' or 'the Kurds'. In the section titled 'characteristics', the guide explains that 'the Arab mind is lively, imaginative, and subtle [...] yet in practical issues, where constructive ability, energy, and dexterity are needed, they often seem to the European more or less incompetent and lazy'.²⁶³ Although the guide begins by describing the heterogeneity of Mesopotamia's Kurds, it goes on to treat them as members of one identifiable 'race' or 'type' whose

²⁶⁰ Omissi, p. 31.

²⁶¹ Omissi, p. 31.

²⁶² *A Handbook of Mesopotamia: Prepared on Behalf of the Admiralty and the War Office/ Admiralty War Staff, Intelligence Division*, vol. 1 (London: Intelligence Division, 1916), p. 7.

²⁶³ *Handbook of Mesopotamia* Vol. 1, p. 68-9.

characteristics could be clearly described: 'these people, though not nearly so intellectual and imaginative as the Arab, have a shrewd appreciation of practical issues, and are far superior to the Arab in energy, enterprise and industry'.²⁶⁴ Like the descriptions of Indians cited by Omissi, these brief descriptions of some of the peoples of Mesopotamia were a way of simplifying their heterogeneity and diversity in order to give the illusion of knowledge and control.

The Arab of Mesopotamia was 'a pamphlet [...] on subjects relating to Mesopotamia' meant for 'those whom the fortune of war has brought to these regions'.²⁶⁵ It was published anonymously but is now known to have been written by Gertrude Bell. The title essay of the collection, 'The Arab of Mesopotamia', described in great detail the tribes and peoples of Mesopotamia, drawing heavily on scientific discourses of race. The essay is premised on the presumption that 'the Arab of Mesopotamia' *could* be described, and its usefulness lay in the assumption that the collective stereotypes contained within it would be of practical use to servicemen when dealing with Mesopotamia's population. Bell explained, for instance, that 'the inhabitants of the Euphrates marshes above Nasiriyah' were 'far down in the scale of civilization'.²⁶⁶ Unlike *The Handbook of Mesopotamia*, Bell's essay went into great detail about tribal hierarchies and other differences between the Arabs of Mesopotamia. But, much like *The Handbook*, she ultimately returns to the collective stereotypes or types in order to ground her argument.

Her description of Arab Shaikhs, in particular, drew heavily on scientific theories of race; she described Ibn Sa'ud ('Abd al-'Aziz ibn 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sa'ud who later founded the modern state of Saudi Arabia) as having:

The characteristics of *the well bred Arab*, the strongly marked aquiline profile, full-fleshed nostrils, prominent lips and long narrow chin, accentuated by a pointed beard. His hands are fine with slender fingers, *a trait* almost universal among the tribes of *pure Arab blood*, and in spite of his great height and breadth of shoulder he conveys the impression, common enough in the desert, of an indefinable lassitude, *not individual but racial*, the secular weariness of an ancient and self-contained people, which has made heavy drafts on its vital force and borrowed little from beyond its own forbidding frontiers.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴ *Handbook of Mesopotamia* Vol. 1, p. 69-70.

²⁶⁵ *The Arab of Mesopotamia* (Basra: The Superintendent Government Press, [1916?]), unnumbered preface.

²⁶⁶ *The Arab of Mesopotamia*, p. 9.

²⁶⁷ *The Arab of Mesopotamia*, pp. 47-8. My emphasis.

Bell's detailed description is not really of Ibn Sa'ud but of 'the well bred Arab', literally a more refined type of Arab, who, for Bell, was personified by the Shaikh. It is clear that she admired him greatly for his 'daring' and 'grasp of statecraft',²⁶⁸ but underlying what is otherwise a detached description, couched in the language of racial determinism, her description of 'the well bred Arab' contains an undertone of sexual attraction. She described him as 'a man of splendid physique' and admired his 'deliberate movements, his slow sweet smile and contemplative glance of his heavy-lidded eyes'.²⁶⁹ Nevertheless, words and phrases such as 'traits' or 'pure Arab blood' position her analysis alongside 'scientific' discourses of race, without which such considerations would be meaningless. Significantly, Bell described the traits she could not admire in Ibn Sa'ud as 'not individual but racial'.

Bell's essay went on to describe other Shaikhs in a similar vein, but with markedly less praise; she described Shaikh Khaz'al as 'a tall man, massively built, with strongly marked but coarsely moulded features of a distinctly Semitic type which vouches for his Arab descent'.²⁷⁰ Here, Bell's analysis is more matter-of-fact: the undertones of admiration are markedly absent, but once again racial types are central to her description. It was through the prism of these discourses that she understood the peoples of Mesopotamia and, consequently, through them that the peoples of Mesopotamia were introduced to British servicemen during the Mesopotamian campaign. Whilst it was inevitable that Bell's own opinions and personal relationships should colour the descriptions she offers anonymously in *The Arab of Mesopotamia*, it remains significant that these were not personal reflections – as many of the accounts so far discussed have been – but an official publication. These discourses were, therefore, central to the vision of Mesopotamia the British government offered servicemen during the campaign.

'The Arabs'

Throughout the campaign, British servicemen developed a fear and an intense dislike of the peoples of Mesopotamia. They generally referred to them as

²⁶⁸ *The Arab of Mesopotamia*, pp. 47-8.

²⁶⁹ *The Arab of Mesopotamia*, pp. 46-7.

²⁷⁰ *The Arab of Mesopotamia*, p. 81.

'Arabs', making little distinction between the different ethnic groups who lived in the region. Many were aware that Mesopotamia also contained Kurds, and some servicemen were aware that many other ethnic groups such as Armenians, Jews, Chaldeans, Yezedis and Sufis also lived in Mesopotamia. But in this early phase of the campaign, British and Indian servicemen were unlikely to encounter Mesopotamia's Kurdish communities, who were mainly situated in its mountainous north, and grouped all others under the general term Arab.

In their most benign, and most frequently encountered form, the Arabs were the purveyors of food stuffs and other commodities purchased by British servicemen. As Donald Maxwell described, 'they are all women who do the selling – weird figures in black carrying baskets of eggs and occasionally chicken. Gesticulating, shouting, shrieking, they rush along beside the up-going steamer and keep even with it'.²⁷¹ Campbell Thompson remarked that 'by 1916 our troops had almost made a habit of buying all sorts of junk' from women, who ran alongside British river-craft 'wearing red and dark gray [...]. One suckled her babe as she ran, she carrying it sitting on her shoulders'.²⁷² Chapter One suggested that in the years before the First World War, Arab women were often described by Britons in ways that sexualised them; the pressures of war stripped away much of the romance that had characterised these pre-war descriptions. The remoteness of the women of Mesopotamia and their custom of veiling themselves was a source of fascination – and some hostility – for British men and women during the campaign.

Mary Ann Brown arrived to serve as a staff nurse in Mesopotamia in December 1916. She went on an excursion with some officers and friends to a local Arab village in March 1917, and recorded in her diary:

The women were drawing water from the river in their queer copper jugs, as we came near them they covered their faces, because they must not let strange men look at them indeed they need not be afraid as they are dirty enough and the majority of them ugly enough, as soon as we go past they have a good squint at us out of one eye, the children are queer dirty little brats.²⁷³

²⁷¹ Maxwell, p. 32.

²⁷² Thompson, p. 48.

²⁷³ Private Papers of M A Brown, I.W.M. Docs. Catalogue Number: 1001 88/7/1, 22 March 1917. (Hereafter Brown).

Brown's description of these women could not be more different from those of the travellers of the early twentieth century, although her description of the children is reminiscent of Louisa Jebb's vision of Mesopotamia. Here, the children are a dirty, verminous presence. Throughout the diary she kept of her time in Mesopotamia, it is clear that Brown was afraid of the people of Mesopotamia, whom she described as a threatening presence. In the description above, her fear manifests itself in a lack of understanding or empathy. She did not seek to understand why the women veiled themselves, but resentfully concluded that they need not have bothered, as they had no sexual allure to hide.

Donald Maxwell's drawing of the women vendors is titled 'Sirens in the Narrows', but the sexual connotations of this title are mitigated by the satire of his description of the women at work. He described them as 'yelling amazons' who ran frantically after the boats trying to 'open up negotiations for eggs while the frenzied and now almost demented sellers left behind rend their clothes and shot imprecations at their rivals'.²⁷⁴ On one of the rare occasions when Kurds were described in this early phase of the campaign, Thompson described two Kurdish 'Amazons': 'Kokhah Nerjis (Narcissus) and Ayeshah Nerjis' who 'fretted and grew bored at not attacking'.²⁷⁵ As British men and women struggled to survive in Mesopotamia, their descriptions of Mesopotamia's women reflected their growing hostility. As British commentators ceased to identify Mesopotamia primarily as the land of the *Arabian Nights* and began to see it simply as a battlefield, the women of Mesopotamia became associated with warfare in British servicemen's descriptions. It is significant that the name of one of the Kurdish 'amazons', 'Ayeshah', calls to Reginald Campbell Thompson's mind Rider Haggard's 'She Who Must Not Be Named' – an evil woman of alluring beauty who was capable of great violence.²⁷⁶ By 1915, 'the soft-rounded figure[s] with glistening russett skin' of David Fraser's descriptions were becoming, for British servicemen serving in Mesopotamia, warrior women: 'redoubtable amazons' who longed to attack British troops.²⁷⁷

British servicemen rarely encountered Mesopotamia's women in situations other than those described above. As a result, the majority of their

²⁷⁴ Maxwell, p.32.

²⁷⁵ Thompson, p. 35.

²⁷⁶ Thompson, p. 35.

²⁷⁷ Thompson, pp. 35-6.

descriptions of Mesopotamia's peoples were of Arab men, who were referred to as 'the Arab' or 'Arabs'. British servicemen believed that 'the Arabs' had no concept of loyalty and were impressed only by shows of military prowess; Thompson noted that 'with the British success at Basrah, the neighbouring Arabs [...] became more friendly'.²⁷⁸ The 'Arabs' were seen as a people 'who made a habit always of turning on a beaten ally',²⁷⁹ and were at all times 'prepared to play the old game of Mr. facing-both-ways'.²⁸⁰ As Major Norman Bray put it in his biography of the traveller and political officer Gerard Leachman: 'Arabs are swayed by near events and are essentially opportunists'.²⁸¹

Bray described Leachman as a 'sportsman, explorer, leader of men, demi-god amongst the great Bedouin tribes'.²⁸² Of these accolades, Leachman's greatest, for Bray, was his ability to bring 'his flock' of Arabs under control.²⁸³ Bray was dismissive of what he described as Leachman's 'violent fits of berserk rage, of his beatings and abuse of the wild Arab',²⁸⁴ concentrating his narrative on Leachman's ability 'to link the wavering Arabs to the British cause'.²⁸⁵ These were widely held perceptions of Mesopotamian Arabs. Wilfred Nunn recalled that upon their arrival at Basra in 1914, 'it was considered advisable that no time should be lost in showing our ability to make headway against the Turks, as the attitude the Arabs would adopt depended largely upon the impression we made at this stage'.²⁸⁶

The belief that 'the wavering Arabs' were liable to turn on their allies in the event of a defeat was firmly entrenched in the minds of those in charge of military planning, as well as those fighting in Mesopotamia. Worries about the 'moral effect on the Arabs' led to an over-emphasis on the importance of 'British prestige in the East' and the need to impress 'the Oriental mind' with ever greater and continuous military success. As Arthur Hirtzel, Political Secretary of the India Office, told the Mesopotamia Commission in 1916, 'it was thought [...] that the effect of standing still would be to

²⁷⁸ Thompson, p. 24.

²⁷⁹ Thompson, p. 24.

²⁸⁰ Thompson, p. 37.

²⁸¹ N.N.E. Bray, *A Paladin of Arabia: The Biography of Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel G.E. Leachman C.I.E., D.S.O. of the Royal Sussex Regiment* (London: The Unicorn Press, 1936), pp. 263-4.

²⁸² Bray, p. v.

²⁸³ Leachman quoted in Bray, p. 274.

²⁸⁴ Bray, p. 266.

²⁸⁵ Bray, p. 268.

²⁸⁶ Nunn, p. 38.

turn the [Mesopotamian] tribes against us, that they would think we were not going on because we could not'.²⁸⁷

British servicemen in Mesopotamia believed that it was impossible to guarantee Arab loyalty, particularly after a defeat; this made 'the Arabs' more vilified, and more hated, than their enemies, the Turks. Although the Turkish regular troops were the official enemy, 'Johnny Turk' was perceived to be an honourable man who, like themselves, was fighting for his country. This British admiration for and affinity with their Ottoman opponents may have had its roots in long-entrenched attitudes, fostered by Britain's support for the Ottoman Empire. Geoffrey Nash has noted that 'the Turks were admired – especially by Victorians – as an ancient imperial race with whom the British shared common characteristics of stoicism and taciturnity'.²⁸⁸ As Brereton's narrator puts it in *On the Road to Baghdad*: 'your Turk is a gentleman whatever else you may say of him'.²⁸⁹

Brereton personifies this image of the honourable Turk in the character of Tewfic Pasha, who reluctantly captures the novel's young heroes, Geoff and Philip. Tewfic Pasha bemoans his country's role in the war 'with our ancient friends the British',²⁹⁰ and tells the young subalterns: 'this I have done as a loyal man, and one who does his utmost for his country; though all the while I know that it is not my country for which I fight'.²⁹¹ His comments reiterate the belief expressed widely in the British press: that Turkey was manipulated by German influence. It is for this reason that the Tewfic Pasha tells Geoff and Phil: 'I know that it is not my country for which I fight'. 'Johnny Turk', British servicemen believed, would not hurt them if it were not for the necessity of war; their hatred was, therefore, reserved for 'the Arabs', whom they believed attacked British and Indian troops in a cowardly fashion – in the dark or from a distance – so that they could not defend themselves.

Sergeant Kingdom wrote home, in a letter that was published in the *Manchester Guardian*, that 'it is all right fighting the Turks, but the Arabs use big muzzle rifles with an enormous lead bullet which will smash anything, and not make a

²⁸⁷ Mesopotamia Commission Archives, L/MIL/17/15/65/2, Evidence of Sir Arthur Hirtzel, p. 88.

²⁸⁸ Geoffrey Nash, 'Politics, Aesthetics and Quest in British Travel Writing on the Middle East' in *Travel Writing in the Nineteenth Century: Filling the Blank Spaces*, ed. by Tim Youngs (London: Anthem Press, 2006), pp. 55-70, (pp. 59-60).

²⁸⁹ Brereton, p. 121.

²⁹⁰ Brereton, p. 257.

²⁹¹ Brereton, p. 257.

pretty little hole like the Turks [...]. The black powder from the Arabs' rifles also causes so much smoke that it is impossible to see the actual firer'.²⁹² As early as January 1915, therefore, British servicemen had identified Arabs as the villains of the Mesopotamian campaign, and this image of Mesopotamia's Arabs was beginning to be communicated to British audiences.

Malcolm Thornburn recorded his antagonism towards 'the Arabs' in his diary: 'Every Arab I would shoot, the devils! Two of our stretcher-bearers – who do not carry rifles – were stripped naked by them the morning after the battle, and in broad daylight too!'²⁹³ It was just this sort of behaviour, attributed to Arabs, that made British servicemen despise them; Thornburn's anger stemmed, in large part, from the fact that the 'Arabs' had attacked defenceless stretcher-bearers after – not during – a battle. His comment on the Turks' behaviour in the same battle, however, was: 'he is a stubborn and good fighter'.²⁹⁴ In January 1916, when Malcolm Thornburn was convalescing in Basra, he reflected: 'the Turk, I think, is a clean fighter – why he did not blow my brains out when on the ground I don't know and they could easily have put the bayonet thro' my middle'.²⁹⁵

Like Malcolm Thornburn, many Britons serving in Mesopotamia resented Arabs far more than their Turkish opponents. Because the Arabs were perceived to have no loyalty to anyone, British servicemen's accounts also emphasised Arab attacks on their 'allies', the Turks. Brereton's novel describes the Arabs as 'just as likely to turn against the Sultan and help an invader',²⁹⁶ and Reginald Campbell Thompson reflected that it did not really matter that after the battle of Shaiba the victorious British and Indian troops had been too exhausted to pursue the Turks, as 'the Turkish allies, the Arabs, saw to that, and cut up the poor devils in their headlong retreat over ninety miles of sand waste'.²⁹⁷ It is unsurprising, given these perceptions of Mesopotamia's Arabs, that Aubrey Herbert recalled a story told to him by a British officer who 'said a Turkish prisoner, a friend of his, had said to him: "Let's have a truce and both kill the Arabs"'.²⁹⁸

²⁹² 'Campaigning in the Mud', *Manchester Guardian*, 15 January 1915, p. 4.

²⁹³ Thornburn, 15 January 1916, p. 92.

²⁹⁴ Thornburn, 15 January 1916, p. 92.

²⁹⁵ Thornburn, 28 January 1916, p. 98.

²⁹⁶ Brereton, pp. 64-5.

²⁹⁷ Thompson, p. 38.

²⁹⁸ Herbert, p. 227.

The main problem posed by 'Arabs' was that they sniped at British and Indian troops continually; Harold Dickson's letters are full of accounts of the snipers who beset his troops. He wrote home in December 1914 that he and his men were 'having great fun with snipers at night. It is a new development in the fighting & is caused by Arabs not Turks'.²⁹⁹ Once again, Dickson's letter emphasised that the real enemy was not the Turk, but the 'Arabs'. He described how these men 'come close to camp at night & open fire', killing men as well as horses.³⁰⁰ He wrote of his 'great joy' when their attempts to capture these snipers proved successful.³⁰¹ Dickson's letters reveal that the continual sniping was a source of great stress for British servicemen, preventing them from having any respite day or night.³⁰²

Whilst the snipers were a nuisance to men serving in Mesopotamia, as Malcolm Thornburn's comments indicate, it was the reputation that the 'Arabs' acquired for being ruthless, cruel and for preying on the weak, sick and wounded that made them hated by British forces. Harold Dickson explained to his mother:

This is a rotten country to fight in really in spite of its archiological interest: our great complaint is that it is inhuman: we take prisoners & look after them but we dare never leave wounded men lying on the ground because the enemy who now are wild desert Arabs cut them in pieces. This wounded question worries one a great deal. It hampers our cavalry reconnaissance work greatly.³⁰³
[sic]

British servicemen worried constantly about what might happen to vulnerable men left out on the battlefield. Horror stories of what the Arabs were capable of doing created an image of them as ruthless and honour-less predators. Arabs were described by servicemen as an ever-present, but often invisible, threat that would manifest itself without warning. Words such as 'marauding' and 'swarming' were often used to describe the 'gangs' of Arabs who were perceived to plague British troops. Malcolm Thornburn wrote from his hospital bed in January 1916: 'a few who never got in at all and lay out all night, and got stripped naked by Arabs suffered more; but I doubt if there are many such survivors'.³⁰⁴ In this account we can see the fear associated with the Arab menace. In contemplating the fate of those left behind, Thornburn was

²⁹⁹ Dickson, 27 December 1914.

³⁰⁰ Dickson, 27 December 1914.

³⁰¹ Dickson, 27 December 1914.

³⁰² Dickson, 29 December 1914.

³⁰³ Dickson, 6 March 1915.

³⁰⁴ Thornburn, 28-1-16, p. 98.

implicitly counting his own blessings. It was this ever-present possibility that a serviceman might find himself wounded, vulnerable and at the mercy of 'Arabs' that fed the fear and hatred of Mesopotamia's inhabitants.

In his memoirs of the retreat from the battle of Ctesiphon, R.C. Thompson alluded to the dread and hostility felt towards 'the Arabs'. Thompson recalled that the wounded Indian soldiers who 'were lying chock-a-block on the upper deck open to the sky, with one blanket each' required 'bales of compressed hay to keep off bullets from the casual Arab'.³⁰⁵ He commented that though the transport for the wounded was inadequate as 'there were no arrangements for so large a number of wounded men', he was relieved that 'we had the ships to carry them off' rather than 'leave them to the Turks, or still worse, the Arabs'.³⁰⁶ Aubrey Herbert's memoirs also alluded to this deeply-entrenched fear of 'the Arabs'; he remembered being told of 'a sick officer in the 21st brigade [who] found five Arabs in his tent and lost everything.' Herbert's only comment on the story was that it was 'lucky for him that was all he lost'.³⁰⁷

In the letter that was published in the *Manchester Guardian*, Sergeant Kingdom reflected that 'they are a blood thirsty lot, these Arabs, and when the men lie wounded they will shoot you at a yard's distance. A subadar of the natives was shot in this way'.³⁰⁸ The prevalence of such descriptions of 'Arab' behaviour in the letters of those serving in Mesopotamia would have conveyed this image of them to their families in Britain, and as letters like Kingdom's began to be published, these perceptions of Mesopotamians began to reach a wider audience.

Captain Barnett arrived in Mesopotamia in January, as part of the Tigris Relief force. Barnett's dislike of Mesopotamia's peoples was far more trenchant and vehement than that expressed by most servicemen in Mesopotamia, but he was particularly enraged by the looting of British and Indian graves, widely attributed to Arabs. Barnett noted in February 1916 that he had seen:

Many graves dug up by Arabs and our good tommies lying stripped and exposed also Indians. Heaven help any Arabs we catch at this game. I swear I

³⁰⁵ Thompson, p. 80.

³⁰⁶ Thompson, p. 81.

³⁰⁷ Herbert, p. 245.

³⁰⁸ 'Campaigning in the Mud', *Manchester Guardian*, 15 January 1915, p. 4.

will shoot or stick them and leave them to linger their miserable lives out if it does not kill them – the unutterable swine.³⁰⁹

Barnett's anger at the desecration of British and Indian graves is understandable. Like the fear of being left wounded on the battlefield, the anger expressed by British servicemen like Barnett stemmed not merely from patriotic protectiveness of the honour of those who had given their lives in battle, but also from the possibility that such an insulting fate may one day befall their own graves. No wonder then that Barnett described the Arabs as 'quite immoral and liars and thieves of the worst description', and suggested: 'all Arabs caught at this game are to be shot. Also I think we may manage to make a false grave with dynamite in it and blow a few of the swine to Jehannum which is their name for hell'.³¹⁰

The belief that Arabs robbed British and Indian graves was widely held. Reginald Campbell Thompson also recalled the 'pathetic funeral' of one of the Indian soldiers, and reflected: 'all we could hope was that we should not be seen doing this, lest ghoulis Arabs disturb him for the sake of the blanket in which he was wrapped'.³¹¹ Such behaviour was seen as simply inexcusable by British servicemen, and added greatly to the hostility British servicemen felt for the Arabs of Mesopotamia.

There is no way of separating the reactions of British servicemen to actual Arab attacks on wounded soldiers or the looting of servicemen's graves from growing resentment of Mesopotamia's inhabitants based merely on their reputation for such behaviour. Once the hatred of Arabs, expressed in so many servicemen's accounts, was entrenched, it is impossible to tell whether events fed a growing fear, or whether fear and resentment fed a growing mythology. The reputation of Arabs for sadistic levels of violence is well-illustrated by the following incident recounted by A. J. Barker in his history of the campaign. Barker relates the story of Major Wheeler and 'his Indian Officer' who led the 7th Hariana Lancers in a charge at the battle of Shaiba, in April 1915:

As Wheeler grasped the standard he was shot, the Indian officer was pulled from his horse. Once they had got him on the ground the Arabs then seized the wretched Indian, poured oil over him and set him on fire; his still smouldering

³⁰⁹ Private Papers of J. W. Barnett, I.W.M. Docs. Catalogue Number: 666 90/37/1, p. 25. (Hereafter Barnett)

³¹⁰ Barnett, p. 25.

³¹¹ Thompson, p. 84.

body was recovered later in the day. Wheeler was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross and the Indian officer the Indian Order of Merit.³¹²

Barker's description of Major Wheeler dying horribly, still gripping the enemy standard, is designed to elicit sympathy for a heroic officer and to contrast this heroism with the behaviour of 'the Arabs'. It is significant, also, that Barker did not feel that it was important to name Jemedar Sudhan Singh, 'the wretched Indian' whose awful death he described so vividly.³¹³ William Bird appears to have witnessed the aftermath of this terrible scene in person. His diary entry for 13 April, 1915 records:

When we arrived on this mound, we found one European Major of our cavalry dead, and stripped naked, he was also mutilated beyond our recognition, and also a native cavalry officer of our cavalry all alight, and practically burnt to a cinder. These men were probably wounded during a charge the cavalry made, about one hour before we supported them. The General has recommended the major for the VC and in my humble opinion he deserves it.³¹⁴

Bird's regiment was one of those in action at the battle of Shaiba, and though he did not name the officers, the circumstances appear too similar for this not to have been the same incident. It is impossible to imagine the impact such a scene would have had on troops fighting in Mesopotamia. It was undoubtedly atrocities such as these that bred the fear of 'the Arabs' evident in the accounts of British servicemen in Mesopotamia at this time. It is significant, however, that while Bird did not attribute the atrocities committed to Arabs, Barker retrospectively did. The incident is a good example of how atrocities, later attributed to Arabs, have lived on and been reproduced in the work of historians of the First World War.

'The Arab' Portrayed to British Audiences

Letters published in British newspapers, such as those from Sergeant Kingdom and the anonymous 'Englishman in the Gulf', were some of the first descriptions of Mesopotamia and its peoples available to people in Britain during this period. Sir Mark Sykes visited Mesopotamia in 1915; in contrast to the usually limited

³¹² Barker, p. 73.

³¹³ Cited in: Martin Gilbert, *First World War* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 140.

³¹⁴ Bird, 13 April 1915.

coverage of the campaign, his visit and comments were published extensively in the British press. In his report, which the *Manchester Guardian* commented would 'make most people realise for the first time the character of the land and people among whom the advance [to Baghdad] is taking place', Sykes reflected on the improved lot of the peasants of Mesopotamia:³¹⁵

Our men, both horse and foot, reached the town soon after they had gone. For the last week the Turkish commander had been maintaining his prestige by daily hangings and shootings, and his last act before leaving had been to shoot six individuals for desertion, spying, or cowardice. Enter the victors; within an hour the women were chaffering milk, dates, and sweet limes, men were patrolling the dirty little streets, a governor was established in an office – tired troops were standing in the sun while billets were sought for them, and most unbelievable of all, the Arab cultivators were dropping in to complain of a certain horseman who had ridden through a crop of beans, and of a supply and transport officer who had parked his belongings in a garden. If 'Frightfulness' is one theory of war, certainly the Briton has another with 'Carry on' as the motto instead of 'Kultur' and in lieu of the *Furor Teutonicus* a kind of *juris obsessio*.³¹⁶

As the *Manchester Guardian* reiterated to its readers, Sykes's article stressed the fairness of British troops and their 'positive obsession for justice'.³¹⁷ Sykes's article was clearly meant to serve as propaganda; he contrasted the ruthlessness of the Turkish commander and the German '*Furor Teutonicus*' with the impeccable behaviour of British troops in Mesopotamia. His message to the British public was clear: British and Indian troops were fair, almost to a fault, to Mesopotamia's Arabs. But the Arabs, whom he described in the same article as a people who 'will accentuate every mishap that may befall, plunder your convoys, threaten your hospitals, cut your telegraph wires, and supply you and your opponents with unreliable information', were portrayed as simply ungrateful and eager to take advantage of the good nature of British and Indian troops.³¹⁸

The purpose of Sykes's article was not to give a representative picture of Anglo-Mesopotamian relations, but to extol the virtues of British forces. However, as many of those serving in Mesopotamia noted, things were not as simple as his article suggested to the British public. Some accounts suggest that Mesopotamia's

³¹⁵ 'The Tigris Expedition', *Manchester Guardian*, 22 November 1915, p.6.

³¹⁶ Sir Mark Sykes, 'The Bagdad Advance', *Manchester Guardian*, 22 November 1915, p.6.

³¹⁷ 'The Tigris Expedition', *Manchester Guardian*.

³¹⁸ Sir Mark Sykes, 'The Bagdad Advance', p.6.

inhabitants were caught in an impossible situation, afraid to show any sign of cooperation with British and Indian authorities, for fear of Turkish reprisals in the event of a British withdrawal. For this reason, men such as Reginald Campbell Thompson commented that while the lack of loyalty shown by Arabs was unfortunate, 'knowing how the Turks treated some of the unfortunates in Kut after the capture, none can blame them'.³¹⁹

Aubrey Herbert also reflected on the consequences for the people left behind, in the event of a British retreat. He noted in his diary that 'this campaign has taught me why we have been called *perfidie Albion*', and rued the fact that when British and Indian troops were forced to 'retreat before a vastly superior force [...] the people who have come in with us get strafed'.³²⁰ Even Norman Bray mitigated his otherwise relentless critique of Arab 'treachery' by noting that 'the Arabs were, in fact, in rather a difficult situation [...]. [They] sought, as more or less primitive people always will, to forestall any dissatisfaction on the part of the Turks by an excess of zeal in their favour'.³²¹ In Bray's analysis, the Arabs' disloyalty could be explained in Social Darwinist terms as the result of their particular stage of evolution. He believed that they simply had not attained a sufficiently civilised state of development to be able to comprehend and appreciate loyalty and honour, as an Englishman could. Nevertheless, his comments draw attention to a side of the Mesopotamian campaign rarely glimpsed in the reflections of the men who fought it, a reminder of the considerations obliterated by fear, resentment, and a lack of empathy in most servicemen's accounts.

The impression that Sykes gave of the relationship between British and Indian troops and Mesopotamia's peoples is brought into question by the diaries and letters of men who served in Mesopotamia during this period. Whilst it might have been true that when British authorities took control of an area they treated the people more equitably than the Turks would have done, it was not always true that British servicemen behaved fairly in their dealings with the people they encountered. Lieutenant-Colonel Barnett's diary detailed many incidents of bullying and theft. On a number of occasions, Barnett stole goods from people he described as Arabs; in one incident Barnett commented simply: 'Arabs swine. So take their eggs & milk & pay

³¹⁹ Thompson, p. 37.

³²⁰ Herbert, p. 212.

³²¹ Bray, p. 278.

after'.³²² On another day later that month, Barnett noted that an Arab had refused his money for some eggs, so he 'kept eggs and kicked Arab out of camp'.³²³ Barnett's diary indicates that this kind of behaviour was endemic; every couple of days, Barnett recorded stealing goods or livestock from local people or bullying them into selling them at a lower price than they were asking. His entry for February 1, 1916 reads:

'Very hungry. Have been getting sheep. Procedure simple. Take 40 armed sepoy, surround flock and pick [...] the fattest despite protests of Arabs. Afterwards give what amount we consider just - great grumblings.'³²⁴

The frequency with which Barnett recorded such behaviour, and the fact that he was able to commandeer troops to harass local people, suggests that his superiors would have been aware of his practices.

Norman Bray's biography of Leachman made no attempt to hide the brutality with which he sometimes dealt with people. He described one incident where Leachman 'had to go away down the river to teach a lesson to some Arabs who had fired on our ships'; in order to punish the men he believed were responsible, Leachman fired 'a lyddite shell in the middle of the sheikh's tent'.³²⁵ Bray's only comment on Leachman's behaviour was that this 'probably taught them the error of their ways'.³²⁶ In a biography that was published in 1936, Bray, who was himself a political officer in Iraq in the twenties, cared little about whether or not the people in the tent were actually responsible for the attacks. Nor does it seem that he found the probability of the shell injuring or killing innocent men, women and children alongside those whom Leachman believed needed to be punished in any way problematic.

Priya Satia argues that the British Government's use of air power in the post-war years to subdue Iraqi tribes was justified by the argument that bloodshed was part of the Bedouin lifestyle and that, consequently, the Bedouins valued the lives of their women and children little, and cared less than Europeans about death. Satia maintains that British political officers were some of the most enthusiastic proponents of these policies of mass punishment because they argued that:

To Bedouin, war was a "romantic excitement" whose production of "tragedies, bereavements, widows and orphans" was a "normal way of life," "natural and

³²² Barnett, p. 37.

³²³ Barnett, p. 22.

³²⁴ Barnett, p. 23.

³²⁵ Bray, p. 273.

³²⁶ Bray, p. 273.

inevitable." Their taste for war was the source of their belief that they were "elites of the human race." It would almost be a cultural offense *not* to bombard them with all the might of the empire.³²⁷

Leachman's methods can be seen as precursors to the policies of air control and mass punishment critiqued by Satia. Norman Bray's attitude towards Leachman's methods was a product of this kind of rationale, fed, in its own way, by reductive racial stereotypes, akin to those discussed in this chapter.

Behaviour such as that described by Bray and Barnett was rarely mentioned in the letters, diaries and memoirs of British servicemen. They did, however, describe freely the means by which British and Indian troops sought to impose order upon the areas of Mesopotamia that they took control of. Upon his arrival at Kut-al-Amara, Townshend recalled that 'in order to put a stop to the looting of the Arabs at the commencement of the siege I had caused twelve men who had been caught in the act to be tried by military commission and shot, *pour encourager les autres*'.³²⁸ The practice of rounding up looters to be shot as an example to the rest of the population does not tally with Sykes's description of the restoration of normal life within an hour of the entrance of 'the victors'.³²⁹

William Bird's diary recorded the use of mock executions to procure information from prisoners³³⁰ and the harsh implementation of martial law in Basra: 'two men have been caught, tried and found guilty [of sniping], and publically [sic] hung. [...] Several men have also been flogged, for not paying attention to the military law, such as, all lights out at 9pm'.³³¹ Bird also noted the raids that he and his colleagues made on villages in the night:

At dawn several companies fix bayonets and rush the houses, any house that refuses to open the door when we first knock, we immediately knock the door down, and make prisoners off [sic] all the male occupants, we then search everything and everywhere for arms, and should we find any we mark the owners 'arms and resistance' which means that they will be tried for both those offences. Those will probably be shot. Those that refuse to open their doors, and haven't any arms, we simply mark them 'resistance only'. Which means they will be tried for resisting military law, and are liable to a long term

³²⁷ Priya Satia, 'The Defense of Inhumanity: Air Control and the British Idea of Arabia' <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/111.1/satia.html>> [Accessed 1 December 2008], p. 22. Emphasis in original.

³²⁸ Townshend, p. 227.

³²⁹ Sir Mark Sykes, 'The Bagdad Advance', *Manchester Guardian*.

³³⁰ Bird, 9 November 1914.

³³¹ Bird, 19 December 1914.

of imprisonment or a good flogging. Those who attempt to run away are either shot as they run, or are caught by our ring of men outside the village. Those are treated as 'combatants', and meet their end on the scaffold.³³²

The implementation of martial law was very different to the bullying and theft described by Barnett, or the violence meted out by Leachman; however, it is clear from Bird's descriptions that the penalties for breaking the rules were severe, and it is doubtful that all the people punished would have understood why.

There is evidence that other officers were more concerned with the way Britain was perceived by the peoples of Mesopotamia. Barnett complained that they had been encouraged to 'make Arabs friendly by kindness',³³³ and Reginald Campbell Thompson recalled that even in the terrible retreat from Ctesiphon they 'were not allowed to shoot their cattle from the steamer as we went down', though the 'natives' continued to snipe at the retreating ships.³³⁴ Moreover, Aubrey Herbert and his associates tried hard to ensure the safety of the Arabs who had been trapped in the town of Kut when Townshend's troops were forced to surrender.³³⁵ While Barnett's behaviour was by no means the rule, it is difficult to believe that such coercion took place as rarely as it was recorded in the memoirs, letters and diaries of the men who served in Mesopotamia – particularly given the shortages of food described by servicemen. If, martial law was applied in the way that William Bird described, British troops were not suffering from the 'positive obsession for justice' that by Sir Mark Sykes described to British audiences.

Fictional Representations

The duplicity that British servicemen believed characterised the Arabs of Mesopotamia was transmitted to British audiences in fictional accounts of the Mesopotamian Campaign. *The Navy in Mesopotamia* was written by Cyril Cox under the pseudonym Conrad Cato and published in 1917. The book is split into two sections: a history of the navy's role in the Mesopotamian campaign up to that point, and

³³² Bird, 14 January 1915. Emphasis in the original.

³³³ Barnett, p. 24.

³³⁴ Thompson, p. 82.

³³⁵ Aubrey Herbert, pp. 233-4.

several short stories about the lives of mariners serving in Mesopotamia. Captain Chalmers's short story 'O.C. The Desert' was a tribute to the political officer Gerard Leachman; it was published in 1932, though it was set before 1920, when Colonel Leachman was killed during the Arab Rising. Patricia Stonehouse's novel *The Gates of Kut* was published in 1917, under the pseudonym Lindsay Russell. Stonehouse's novel is a romance in which the hero, Philip Territt, is sent to Mesopotamia as part of the Tigris relief force.

In each of these texts, a British officer disguises himself, or is disguised, as an Arab. The Englishman convincingly disguised as an Arab is a prevalent feature in contemporary fictional accounts of the Mesopotamian campaign.³³⁶ In each case, the disguise is good enough to fool their colleagues and even Arabs into believing that they are really Arabs until, at the end of each story, they reveal their true identity. In donning their disguise, these characters literally re-enact the duplicity British servicemen associated with the Arabs of Mesopotamia.

Cyril Cox's story, 'Unmixed Bathing', is presented to the reader as a re-telling of events that actually took place. A group of officers convince their colleague, Toby, to go shooting with them early the next day. The next morning they are 'considerably riled at receiving a note from Toby to say that he was sorry that he could not accompany them after all, because another pressing engagement had intervened'.³³⁷ The officers set off without Toby and soon encounter the Sheikh of Margill: 'a white-headed Arab striding majestically along the river-bank, followed at a respectful distance by an attendant'.³³⁸ The Shaikh tells them that his six wives are bathing in a nearby lake and, to their surprise, informs them that 'in honour of the great Navy of your country. If it would please you, you shall see my wives. But only from a distance'.³³⁹ Led by the Shaikh's attendant, the men walk for hours in search of the Shaikh's bathing wives, but never find them. Hot, tired and disappointed they eventually come upon Toby; having enjoyed a morning's shooting with the guns they left behind, he merrily tucks into their picnic. After teasing them for a while with

³³⁶ See for instance: *The Story of Jonathan Rust* by 'Taffrail' in *Great Short Stories of the War: England, France, Germany America, With an Introduction by Edmund Blunden* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1930), pp. 796-810 and Herbert Strang, *Carry On! A Story of the Fight for Bagdad* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1917).

³³⁷ Conrad Cato, *The Navy in Mesopotamia, 1914-1917* (London: Constable & co., 1917), p. 134.

³³⁸ Cato, p. 135.

³³⁹ Cato, p. 139.

comments such as: “‘I’ve often heard of the Sheikh of Margill,” [...] “Nice old bloke, isn’t he?’”³⁴⁰ and: ‘By the way, is he married?’, Toby reveals the fact that he had been the Shaikh all along:

Then Toby, having eaten a very satisfactory lunch quietly picked up a newspaper which had been lying beside him on the ground. Underneath it were disclosed the abba and ch-feea of an Arab Sheikh, and beside them a neat little japanned tin box, which anyone in the theatrical profession would have recognized at once as a make-up box.

“I think,” said Toby, “That he must have gone to bathe with his harem, as he has left his clothes behind.”³⁴¹

Chalmers’s much later story, ‘O.C. The Desert’, is also framed as a fictionalisation of events that actually took place. In the story, Colonel Leachman sets off from the Mesopotamian city of Kufa on a secret mission. Later that day, Chalmers arrests an Arab while he and his men are on patrol along the Tigris. The Arab refuses pigeon, cider or water, leading the narrator to comment: ‘truly he was an Arab of the fanatical Shiah persuasion. I felt I would be delighted to hand him over to the Political Officer at Kufa’.³⁴² Chalmers consults Gertrude Bell, whom they encounter on the Tigris; the Arab refuses to speak to her, but she informs Chalmers that the tribe he claims to be from is not one she is familiar with: “‘I see no mention of the Beni Fik. They may, of course, be a small tribe under the protection of a powerful one, such as the Beni Said or the Muntafik.’”³⁴³ This is the reader’s only clue that the ‘Arab’ may not be whom he appears to be. Chalmers decides to take the Arab back to Kufa. As night descends, the Arab is secured to the boat to prevent any attempt at escape, when to Chalmers’s surprise he speaks to him in English:

“I say, old man, you must let me go.”
I looked down astounded! My prisoner’s sharp guttural Arabic had tuned into smooth cultural English! I stared into his face. ‘Who the devil are you?’
“Leachman.”
“Leachman! Good heavens! Yes! But it’s only your tongue that gives you away. What’s the game?”³⁴⁴

³⁴⁰ Cato, p. 144.

³⁴¹ Cato, p. 144.

³⁴² I. Chalmers, ‘O.C. The Desert’, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, February 1932, pp. 259-267 (p.263).

³⁴³ Chalmers, p. 264.

³⁴⁴ Chalmers, p. 265.

Leachman's cover is so convincing that Chalmers and Gertude Bell – a figure of expertise – are entirely convinced that he is an Arab. As Chalmers tells him, it is only his own confession that gives him away when he is ready to reveal his true identity. The story ends with Chalmers allowing 'the Arab' to escape, in order to maintain Leachman's cover.

Patricia Stonehouse's novel is a romance set against the backdrop of the siege of Kut. Philip Territt is in love with Enid, the wife of his best friend, George Marcourt. The couple's plan, to meet for one last illicit dinner before Territt leaves for Mesopotamia, is thwarted by the venerable Lady Emma Beckendon. Believing that Enid had simply changed her mind, a heart-broken Territt becomes engaged to young Beatrice Byndham and leaves for Mesopotamia. When news comes that Philip is believed dead after a brave but unsuccessful reconnaissance mission, both women mourn his death. In fact, the reader discovers that Philip Territt is not dead at all, but has been badly injured in battle. Lying amongst the corpses of his comrades, Territt is discovered by a Turkish officer as 'the Buddoos [Bedouins] hurried with the task of looting and pilfering from the pockets of those who lay so stiff and still, finished with all earthly possessions'.³⁴⁵

Like the Turk in Aubrey Herbert's memoirs, the Ottoman officer hates the 'Buddoos' who rob the dead and wounded, and calls them 'thieves and robbers', 'treacherous dogs' and 'Bedouin pigs'.³⁴⁶ The Turkish officer recalls that the British had treated the Turks fairly at Gallipoli and, upon hearing that Philip Territt had served there, decides to help him escape the clutches of the 'treacherous and cruel Arabs' by returning him to his colleagues.³⁴⁷ In order to do this, the Turk dresses himself and Philip in Arab clothing and, to complete the Arab disguise, escorts the weak Territt back to the British lines on camel-back. Upon their arrival, the men in the camp believe them to be Arabs and are immediately on their guard: 'What did it portend? Who could trust a Buddoo?'.³⁴⁸ Their reactions convey the fear and distrust British servicemen felt towards Mesopotamia's population. The men are relieved to discover

³⁴⁵ Patricia Ethel Stonehouse [pseudo. Lindsay Russell], *The Gates of Kut: A Novel* (London: Cassel and Company, 1917), p. 190.

³⁴⁶ Stonehouse, p. 198.

³⁴⁷ Stonehouse, p. 201.

³⁴⁸ Stonehouse, p. 212.

that the 'Buddoo' approaching their camp is 'Phillip Territt, in the garb of an Arab [...] come back, after all.'³⁴⁹

In each of these stories the duplicity, which British servicemen believed characterised the Arabs of Mesopotamia, is personified in the Arab who is not an Arab. The British officer in Arab clothing literally embodies the distrust British servicemen felt towards Mesopotamia's Arab tribesmen. The fear surrounding the Arabs of Mesopotamia is expressed overtly in Stonehouse's novel and Chalmers's story. *The Gates of Kut* depicts the Arabs as thieves preying on dead and wounded, and contrasts this with the honourable Turk; like Brereton's *On the Road to Bagdad*, it echoes the sentiments of British servicemen in Mesopotamia uncannily well for a novel published within a year of the events it fictionalises. Philip Territt tells his colleagues: "'They are clean fighters and brave enemies, these Turks. I'll say that for much for them'",³⁵⁰ and describes how the Turk "'risked his own life every hour for three days"' in order to save his.³⁵¹ Chalmers's story contrasts the treachery of the Arabs (who would later kill Leachman) with his loyalty, heroism and fair treatment. Chalmers asks Leachman about a story he has heard that Leachman had allowed an Arab who had tried to kill him to go free after only 'a brotherly scolding':³⁵²

Leachman smiled.

"If you had brought that fellow in he would have had to face a firing squad."

"Yes. Poor devil. I expect he's reformed now."³⁵³

These stories can also be situated in a tradition of British travel literature in which a British traveller dresses as an oriental in order to gain an insight into the lifestyle or places forbidden to non-Muslims. Most famously, Sir Richard Burton dressed as a 'Darwayash' (Dervish) to gain access to the forbidden cities of Mecca and Medina: 'the Moslem's Holy Land, the jealously guarded Harím'.³⁵⁴ Burton's

³⁴⁹ Stonehouse, p. 213.

³⁵⁰ Stonehouse, p. 250.

³⁵¹ Stonehouse, p. 254.

³⁵² Chalmers, p. 260.

³⁵³ Chalmers, p. 260.

³⁵⁴ Richard Burton K.C.M.G., F.R.G.S., *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah&Meccah: Memorial Edition*, 2 vols (London: Tylston and Edwards, 1893), vol 1, p. 2. James Canton discusses other British travellers, such as Arthur Wavel, who travelled to Mecca disguised as an Arab in 1908, in Chapter One of his thesis, 'From Cairo to Baghdad: British Travel Writing on Arabia, 1882 – 2003'. James Canton, 'From Cairo to Baghdad: British Travel Writing on Arabia, 1882–2003' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Essex, 2008.)

language betrays the power inherent in his penetration of the holy cities, which he sexualised and feminised as a harem in the preamble to the tale of his travels. Burton was honest about his motivation: he was eager to go where he was forbidden to enter, to see and describe what no European had seen before.

In the early twentieth century, E.B. Soane travelled from Istanbul to Baghdad in disguise. Upon his arrival at the city of Baghdad, he simply threw off his disguise, revealing, to the shock of his fellow passengers, his true, British, identity. In the narrative of his journey, *To Mesopotamia and Kurdistan in Disguise*, Soane described his mixed feelings at resuming his European identity once more:

I felt a stranger and more lonely than I had done ever before. Gone was the coffee-house and the bazaar, of the multitudes of which I was one, and equal, with whom I spoke and laughed and fought and wrangled. They were far away, and I must learn to look upon them as upon strange and inferior beings, if such were now possible, and taking place again on the platform of Western birth, once more go on my way affecting to ignore their joys and sorrows – which had so lately been my own.³⁵⁵

In this description, Soane reveals his affection for the people whose identity he had temporarily taken on, but also what it meant for a European to look upon the peoples of the east. As a European, Soane felt that he had to learn once more ‘to look upon them as upon strange and inferior beings’. This, for him, was part of ‘taking on the platform of Western birth’; his cultural inheritance was to take a superior perspective on the people whose identity he had so easily assumed. The very act of ‘becoming’ an ‘Oriental’ gave Soane a power over those whom he fooled; from his more privileged stance as a European, Soane’s description suggests, he was able to lower himself to the status of eastern peoples, in order to gain access to a way of life that would otherwise have been impossible for him to experience.

In Chalmers’s story and in Stonehouse’s novel, the British officers have to fool the Arabs into believing that they are Arabs too: Territt in order to survive, and Leachman in order to subvert the Arabs’ disruptive activities. This can be read as an assertion of superiority, but also of control. Cox’s story, ‘Unmixed Bathing’, is much more light-hearted, and free of the darker descriptions of Arabs that are central to the plots of the other texts. However, in common with the others, it dramatises the duplicity British servicemen associated with Mesopotamia’s Arabs in such a way as to

³⁵⁵ E.B. Soane, *To Mesopotamia and Kurdistan in Disguise: With Historical Notices of the Kurdish Tribes and the Chaldeans of Kurdistan* (London: John Murray, 1912), pp. 365-6.

give the impression of British power and control. It was the lack of control over the behaviour of the people British servicemen described as Arabs that frightened them most. Again and again, they returned to their belief that the Arabs could not be trusted. One never knew if the Arab was who, or what, he (and it was invariably a he) said he was. While the three texts differ in their portrayal of Mesopotamia's Arabs, in each the act of 'becoming' an Arab is an assertion of control in a situation where British and Indian troops' fears stemmed from the feeling that they had very little control.

The Siege of Kut

In late October 1915, General Sir John Nixon was authorised to despatch a force to capture Baghdad. From this point on, the Mesopotamian campaign became the centre of a great deal of media attention. British publications focused for the first time on what they believed would be the greatest military capture of the war so far: a panacea for Britain's failing 'prestige in the East' and the frustration at the inactivity on the Western Front.

Having been promised reinforcements of two Indian divisions from France, General Nixon ordered Townshend to advance towards Baghdad with the 6th (Poona) Division. Townshend protested that he did not believe that his force was strong enough to take Baghdad against reinforced Turkish troops, but in spite of this Nixon ordered him onwards. Townshend's troops advanced towards Baghdad in November 1915; they met Turkish troops at Ctesiphon, or Sulaiman Pak, on 21 November 1915, but were forced to retreat on the 24-25 November.

As Thompson's memoirs indicated, the retreat was a terrible ordeal for all the troops involved; the scarcity of transport and medical care for the wounded led to terrible suffering. When news of the inadequacy of medical facilities reached London, it caused a scandal that led to the resignation of Austen Chamberlain, the secretary of state for India, and hastened a change of leadership in both India and Britain. Townshend and his men retreated to Kut al-Amara, which they reached on 3 December 1915. The 6th Division was quickly surrounded and became besieged at Kut.

Townshend's decision to remain at Kut has been criticised, but he argued that the town was strategically important, and that in any event his troops could march no further. In particular, Townshend blamed his Indian troops, whom he believed were too weak to go on. 'Never have I seen anything like the exhaustion of the troops after we reached Kut', he noted in his memoir. '[The] great bulk of the Indian troops could not move at all, though I got the British troops to work on 4th December'.³⁵⁶ As has been discussed, this was not the first or the only time that Charles Townshend would lament the ineptitude of his Indian troops. Although his views were shared by some, Townshend's own reputation would come under attack by those who would contest his account of the siege of Kut. The remainder of this chapter will discuss different accounts of the siege of Kut, in an effort to assess how discourses of race and civilization shaped servicemen's accounts, and how they continue to shape our understanding of the siege of Kut today.

Major-General Charles Townshend, who had made his name at the Siege of Chitral (4th March to 20th April 1895), believed that he and his men would soon be relieved. However, Townshend gave his commanders the wrong impression of how long his stores could last. As a result, Aylmer's relieving force was obliged to attempt to break through Turkish defences in terrible conditions in January 1916. The battles of Shaikh Saad, Wadi and Hanna were lost at great cost of life. General Gorringe made a final attempt to relieve the garrison in March 1916, but this was also unsuccessful, and the garrison surrendered on 29 April 1916. It is estimated that around 23,000 men lost their lives in the attempt to relieve the garrison at Kut.³⁵⁷ The surrender caused a public outcry in Britain that focused media attention on the Mesopotamian campaign for the first time. Ministers defended themselves against charges that they had sent British and Indian troops into battle unprepared and ill-equipped because they had been blinded by 'political' considerations. Around ten thousand soldiers surrendered to Turkish forces in April 1916, and while Townshend was whisked off to spend his captivity in luxury, the tales of the suffering of the prisoners at the hands of their captors became infamous. Around a third of the men who were captured by the Turks did not make it through their captivity. Many did not even make it to Anatolia:

³⁵⁶ Townshend, p. 211.

³⁵⁷ Robert. F. Jones, 'Kut', in *The Great War: Perspectives on the First World War*, ed. by Robert Cowley (London: Pimlico, 2004), pp. 198- 216 (p.199).

weakened by the siege, their bodies simply could not cope with the long march into Turkey.³⁵⁸

The hardships of the siege of Kut and the march endured by the captured troops brought into stark relief the discourses of race and civilization that were central to the way the Mesopotamian campaign had been understood by British servicemen. Discourses of race continue to play an important role in the way contemporary historians discuss the siege of Kut. This stems, to some extent, from Townshend's account of the siege, in which he attributed his surrender to the weakness of his Indian troops. As rations ran low, Hindu and Muslim troops refused to eat horsemeat along with the rest of the garrison. As a result, they became weak and suffered more from the diseases that were soon endemic in the garrison than other troops under Townshend's command. Townshend made a concerted effort to change the minds of the men who would not eat horsemeat, seeking special permission from religious leaders in India, for example. But this made little difference, and the men who would not eat the meat grew ever weaker.

In his article 'Sepoys and the Siege of Kut- al- Amara', Nikolas Gardner argues that Townshend's ability to successfully hold the city of Kut was significantly diminished by the large contingency of Indian troops under his command. Gardner maintains that Townshend and Nixon have been unfairly blamed by historians for the surrender of the garrison, and that not enough weight has been given to Townshend's own analysis of the situation, which placed the blame squarely on the inferiority of his Indian troops. Gardner maintains that whilst it is true that the push for Baghdad was ill-judged, and although Townshend made a rescue operation all the more difficult in his failure to supply Aylmer with an accurate assessment of his food rations, it was ultimately the malnutrition of Townshend's Indian forces, caused by their refusal to eat horsemeat, which doomed the siege of Kut to failure. He concludes that 'significantly [...] the inability of 6 Indian Division to resist for a longer period, or to

³⁵⁸ Figures in the official history of the campaign state that 10,061 combatants surrendered at Kut. 1,136 sick and wounded men were exchanged for Turkish prisoners. The death-toll among British soldiers was extremely high. Moberly writes that 'over 70 per cent died in captivity or have never been traced.' Figures for Indian servicemen are less precise. Moberly explains that 'of the Indian rank and file about 1,300 are known to have died in captivity; between 1,100 and 1,200 escaped or were exchanged; the remainder were either repatriated or have been presumed to be dead. Exact statistics as to the number repatriated are not available.' Moberly, vol. 2, p. 460.

assist the progress of the relief force, resulted largely from the conduct of its Indian members'.³⁵⁹

The siege of Kut can be read as a pressurized microcosm of the Mesopotamian campaign. The prejudices and misunderstandings that have been discussed with relation to the campaign as a whole were more clearly articulated during the siege, because men were trapped in close quarters and in a highly stressful situation. The difficult relationship described between the Arabs and the British and Indian troops was re-created during the siege. Townshend reluctantly allowed around 6,000 women and children to remain in the garrison at the behest of Sir Percy Cox, who feared the political consequences of allowing such a large number of civilians to perish in the desert. For Townshend's part, he reflected that though he had 'very reluctantly' allowed the women and children to stay,³⁶⁰ he had 'always bitterly regretted [his] clemency'.³⁶¹ Being trapped in a camp with people whom they believed to be hostile and ready to turn on them at any time did not endear the Arabs to the men besieged at Kut, particularly after stores were discovered hidden in the town mid-way through the siege. Townshend took several Arab men into custody to ensure the good behaviour of the others. For Townshend, it 'went without saying' that 'they were in communication with the enemy [...], and [his] anxiety was based on the fact that many rifles must have been buried and concealed'.³⁶²

The siege highlighted how little British servicemen understood of their Indian colleagues, and, as food shortages increased to unbearable levels, resentment grew about how rations should be divided up. It was known that some of the 'native' troops were refusing to eat horsemeat. As Private Hockaday of B Company, 2nd Queen's Own Royal West Kents recalled, this caused some resentment amongst the British troops. Hockaday told his interviewer that 'the natives were authorised by their leaders that they could eat mules and horse-flesh, but they would not do so. So that made them have the double ration of flour to us. So instead of hanging out for four months or five months, we may have hanged out for a month longer'.³⁶³ He resented the fact that 'the natives' were given a double ration of flour, repeating this

³⁵⁹ Nikolas Gardner, 'Sepoys and the Siege of Kut-al-Amara, December 1915- April 1916', *War in History*, 11 (2004), 307-326 (p. 326).

³⁶⁰ Townshend, p. 228.

³⁶¹ Townshend, p. 228.

³⁶² Townshend, p. 227.

³⁶³ R.G. Hockaday, I.W.M. Sound Archive, Accession Number 4123. My transcript. (Hereafter Hockaday).

information in his interview. Like Townshend, Hockaday blamed the Indian soldiers for what he saw as the garrison's premature surrender in April 1916. Private Finch, who served with 1st Battalion Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, also recalled that some Indian troops would not eat horsemeat, but did not have a clear idea of who had refused it, or why they did not want to eat it:

Well in the siege there was quite a number of Mohammedans and they wouldn't eat horse. If they had ate horse, instead of their ordinary cows, that siege would have lasted another month because I think there was more Mohammedans than there was Hindus, or vice versa – I don't know which it was – one of them didn't want to eat cattle ... erm ... horse. Anyhow, by wire they sent out to the head Mohammedan and he sent back to say that they could eat horsemeat and after that these natives started to eat horsemeat.³⁶⁴

The mixture of resentment and lack of real understanding, as well as the conflation of creed with race was typical of reactions to Indian troops during the Mesopotamian campaign.

Townshend worried about the loyalty of his Indian troops throughout the siege of Kut. In his memoirs, he emphasised the lengths he had gone to, to accommodate their religious beliefs and the fact that he 'never ceased to take every means possible of raising the moral [sic.] of the Indian troops'.³⁶⁵ He complained that despite his efforts to keep the Indian men happy:

Several cases of self-mutilation were detected [...] among the men in one of the Indian battalions, who shot off their trigger fingers and pretended they had been wounded. [...] All these men, twelve or thirteen of them – were tried and received heavy sentences. There were also two or three desertions by Indian soldiers to the enemy on 29th and 30th December, and I had several courts martial for cases of cowardice before the enemy and sleeping on post.³⁶⁶

In his account of the siege of Kut, Ronald Millar gives a different impression of Townshend's treatment of his Indian troops. Millar's history of the campaign points out that other officers gave favourable accounts of the behaviour of Indian troops during the siege, even those who had lost their British commanding officers.³⁶⁷ Millar notes that 'the Indian soldiers suffered especially from the cold. They started to wear

³⁶⁴ W.S. Finch, I.W.M Sound Archive, Accession Number 4100. My transcript. (Hereafter Finch)

³⁶⁵ Townshend, p. 229.

³⁶⁶ Townshend, p. 236.

³⁶⁷ Ronald Millar, *Kut: The Death of an Army* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1969), p. 95.

blankets over their heads and shoulders. Townshend heartlessly strictly forbade this practice as “unsoldierly”.³⁶⁸

During the siege of Kut, Townshend became a hero in the British press. The papers marvelled at the courage he and his men displayed, and mourned their surrender. However, after his surrender, Townshend was imprisoned in great comfort at Prinkipo Island, near Constantinople. Although he was made a knight in 1917, as accounts were published of the suffering his men endured, he was perceived to have abandoned his men for a luxurious imprisonment and lost much of his popularity. He was also heavily criticised for his self-aggrandising portrayal of the events leading up to the siege of Kut, especially as other accounts emerged in which he was mocked and vilified.

It was the treatment of troops after the siege of Kut that made the greatest impact on British audience after the war. Accounts of the siege such as E. O. Mousely’s *Secrets of a Kuttite* and E. W. C. Sandes’s *In Kut and Captivity* gave terrible descriptions of the treatment of British troops at the hands of the Arabs and Kurds who accompanied them to Anatolia.³⁶⁹ Ronald Millar began his history of the siege with a description of the march to the prisoner of war camps:

The wake of the column was strewn with human litter, the dead, the dying and others, unable to march any further, waiting for death from the rifle butts of their *Arab* guards. These *Kurdish* guards had gone on the rampage soon after the troops had marched out of temporary Turkish prisoner of war camp.³⁷⁰

Millar’s description conveyed both the hatred of Mesopotamia’s native population and the confusion there remained about who was responsible for atrocities committed against captive Indian and British troops. Millar’s history of the siege switched easily between describing the guards who accompanied the captured troops as Arabs or Kurds, as if the two terms were interchangeable.

It is unclear from the accounts of those who survived the march who exactly mistreated the captured men, because the survivors could not, or did not, distinguish between their captors. It is clear, however, that the troops who

³⁶⁸ Millar, p. 97.

³⁶⁹ Edward Opoliki Mousely, *The Secrets of a Kuttite: An Authentic Story of Kut, Adventures in Captivity and Stamboul Intrigue* (London: John Lane, 1921); Edward Warren Caulfield Sandes, *In Kut and Captivity: With the Sixth Indian Division* (London: John Murray, 1919).

³⁷⁰ Millar, p. 1. My emphasis.

surrendered at Kut were treated very badly on their march to Anatolia. F. G. Ponting was a non-commissioned officer in the 1st Battalion Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. Ponting remembered being marched into a Turkish barracks in Baghdad: ‘As we went along there they was throwing stones at us, spitting at us, tried to come and hit us, and we wasn’t at all popular’.³⁷¹ But the worst aspect of their imprisonment was the march from Baghdad to Anatolia. Ponting recalled:

We had a pretty rough time there, and that started the show going; that we started our march. [...] It wasn’t hours they were talking in, they was talking in days. They said it would be about [unclear] days, the next march before you come to water. We got no water bottles, we got nothing to carry water with; so when we come to where the water was – you’re apt to lay straight away down and lap it up. But a lot of our fellows died through that, through typhoid germs and other germs that was in this water.³⁷²

Ponting’s description of the treatment troops received upon their arrival at the Turkish barracks suggests that it was Turkish soldiers who mistreated the captured men. He was unspecific about who had led them to Anatolia, and his description of the march suggests that, although they were deprived of enough clean water and made to march for days at a time, they were not physically abused by their guards.

Private Hockaday also recalled the terrible hardships of the march to Anatolia, but his account was a little more specific about who was harassing the British and Indian troops:

It wasn’t really Turks, it was all sorts dressed anyhow: Arabs and Kurds and everything. We were very weak at the time and used to march along [...] as best as we could. But all the time they were behind you, hammering you come on ‘imshi’ ‘yella’, hitting you in the back with a rifle. And if you fell out by the wayside you was left to lay and die if your comrades did not help you at all. And we went through many Arab villages and all the time they had to gallop up and down to keep them from getting at us, they would draw their knives across their throat and say, “English finish”, and spit on you and all sorts. And when you rested by night, they would go around while you were sleeping and steal anything they could lay their hands on. On the last day before Baghdad, I had my boots stolen, and I had to walk along – with the help of my comrades – I was very weak, [...] and when they got to Baghdad there was a mob of Arabs there, throwing mud and spitting on us. And we eventually arrived up by the river, railway bank in Baghdad. They kept us there about a week and anyone [who] could stand at all had to go on another 200 mile march. Fortunately, or

³⁷¹ F. G. Ponting, IWM Sound Archive, Accession Number: 4203. My transcript.

³⁷² Ponting.

unfortunately, [...] I was too weak to go on with hundreds of others and we were left behind.³⁷³

Descriptions like Hockaday's of men being beaten for falling out of the convoy with exhaustion and of the theft of even the most basic equipment, such as boots, were very common. Though his description suggests that troops were neglected and ill-treated by their guards, Hockaday did not imply that the men lived in perpetual fear of death at the hands of their captors. Hockaday was not sure who his guards were; he believed that they were not Turks, but could not distinguish between the others. His description of the terrible reception British and Indian troops received upon their arrival in Mesopotamian towns and villages also leaves it unclear whom mistreated or robbed the prisoners. However, the words he recalled being shouted at troops who fell behind were Arabic: 'imshi', walk and 'yella', hurry up.

General (then Lieutenant) Henry Hampton Rich, who served in the 120th Rajputana Infantry, remembered that not all British prisoners were treated in this way; as an officer he was never made to march but was given a mule to ride. He and his fellow officers only heard of the terrible suffering of their men upon their arrival in Anatolia:

The conditions for the officers were hard but no more than that; the conditions for the men were absolutely brutal and hellish. How any of them survived it, I really can't make up my mind. Because they were all ill – everyone was bound to have been ill – their boots were stolen from them, their helmets were stolen from them, but some got through. Roughly about 70 per cent of the British soldiers and 30 per cent of the Indians died on the march, or as a direct result from the march, when they got up to the camps the other end.³⁷⁴

Rich's description of the men's suffering tallied exactly with the descriptions given by Hockaday and Ponting: the men were extremely badly treated by their captors and deprived of even their most basic kit. Rich also heard stories of the terrible treatment of troops by Arab villages along their route: 'the Arab villagers had a very pleasant habit of going up on the hill-top behind and dropping rocks on them'.³⁷⁵ He also described the terrible treatment of the men by their captors: 'When they arrived, dead tired and dead beaten and pretty sick, they were left in the open for a day, which was not too bad so they got some food and at night, they were shut in dungeons in the fort

³⁷³ Hockaday.

³⁷⁴ Henry Hampton Rich, Imperial War Museum, Sound Archive, London. Accession Number: 766

³⁷⁵ Rich.

[...] barracks itself and they were not allowed out, even for purposes of nature, and as most of them had dysentery – well, it wasn't very pleasant.'³⁷⁶ However, in common with Hockaday and Ponting, Rich did not specify who had mistreated the prisoners. Moreover, none of the men described the guards as being as brutal as Millar's introduction suggests.

However, it is the most terrible stories told by survivors of the siege of Kut that are reproduced by modern historians. Gilbert, for example, quotes extensively from Mousely's account of the march to Anatolia. Gilbert describes the march as 'a veritable death march [...] foreshadowing the Gestapo-organised death marches of Jewish concentration camp prisoners at the end of the Second World War'.³⁷⁷ *The First World War* depicts the brutally long marches, the stolen equipment, the lack of the most basic concern for the welfare of British and Indian troops, which Rich, Hockaday and Ponting described. However, Gilbert also uses Mousely's emotive description of the march:

The eyes of our men stared from white faces drawn long with the suffering of a too tardy death and they held out their hands towards our boat. As they dragged one foot after another, some fell and those with the rearguard came in for blows and cudgels and sticks.³⁷⁸

Such a description was designed to elicit an emotional response from the reader: Mousely conveyed his impotence and anger at witnessing the maltreatment of his men. This does not tally, however, with Rich's account: he was very clear that the officers had no idea of the suffering of their men until they reached the camps. Gilbert intersperses his account of the siege with descriptions of the terrible reception troops received upon their arrival at Mesopotamian towns, lending them the weight of an objective historical account. He anonymously reproduces P.W. Long's account, also to be found in Barker's history of the campaign, which described the guards specifically as Arab, in a way that other prisoners did not, and depicted a level of violence that was not present in other accounts of the march:

Finding, among seven naked corpses lying in a yard, one man who appeared to be alive, a fellow prisoner asked an Arab guard to give the man some water. "At that he picked up a water bottle and asked me to show him the man. Suspecting nothing, I did so, and the Arab walked round to his head, and

³⁷⁶ Rich.

³⁷⁷ Gilbert, p. 247.

³⁷⁸ Gilbert, p. 247.

forcing open his mouth, inserted the neck of the bottle inside. A few bubbles, a convulsive twist, and the poor fellow was dead, deliberately choked to death."³⁷⁹

Although it is clear that the men who were marched to Anatolia were treated appallingly by their captors, the description quoted by Gilbert's modern history of the war is far more violent than those offered by Rich, Hockaday or Ponting. Long's description is also emotive, painting the Arab guard as a cold, evil man who killed the British soldier in his care in cold blood. As with any ordeal, there will always be different accounts of what took place during the march: it is impossible to know how much of the behaviour attributed to Arabs was actually carried out by Arabs, and how much of it was the result of the fear and hatred British servicemen attached to image of 'the Arab' in Mesopotamia. It is, however, clear that the men who surrendered at Kut-al-Amara went through a terrible ordeal, and that they were treated horrendously by those in charge of their transportation to Anatolia. Finally, it is the most terrible of the versions of the siege of Kut and its aftermath that has survived in histories of the Mesopotamian campaign.

Conclusions

Discourses of race and civilization were central to the way that British men and women made sense of their experiences in Mesopotamia during the campaign. In part, this can be attributed to the centrality of such ideas to the practices of the Indian army, which had at its core an understanding of 'native' soldiers that relied on race as an organising principle. However, the importance of race and imperial ideologies in understanding Mesopotamia was also a reflection of their prominence in the mindset of British servicemen themselves. Faced with cultures and peoples they did not understand and who were seen as a threat throughout the campaign, British servicemen made sense of the people of Mesopotamia in the only way they knew: through the prism of familiar discourses of race and empire. As a result, Mesopotamia's peoples were often homogenised into racial types, as India's peoples had been, giving the illusion of British control. It was the lack of real control over the

³⁷⁹ Gilbert, pp. 247-8; also in Barker, p. 295.

behaviour of the peoples of Mesopotamia that led to a consummate fear of its inhabitants, most often described as Arabs. The duplicity and violence that British servicemen believed characterised Mesopotamia's peoples led them to despise the Arabs as honourless, cowardly foes who preyed on the weak and wounded for nothing but material gain. These descriptions of the Arabs reached their peak in the descriptions of the terrible treatment of British prisoners after the siege of Kut. Here, the fear and hatred of the Arabs is manifested in a number of particularly violent accounts of the march to Anatolia, which have become the standard version of siege. It is impossible to know how much of this is true and how much a result of the perceptions of Mesopotamia's peoples that developed during the campaign, but the image of the ruthless, duplicitous Arab was now fixed, and would impact on British perceptions of Mesopotamia for the rest of the campaign.

3

The Siege of Kut and its Aftermath in Britain

Through a close analysis of the way that Townshend's advance, entrapment at Kut, and eventual surrender were represented in the British press and contemporary literature, this chapter will discuss the impact of the siege of Kut on representations of Mesopotamia in Britain. It will also look closely at the debate surrounding the advance to Baghdad and its consequences in an effort to explore what the Mesopotamia Commission's archives and contemporary political debates tell us about changing attitudes towards empire in Britain.

Although they had reported only brief updates of Indian Expeditionary Force D's (IEF D) progress, as Townshend and his men made the bulk of their advance northwards, many British newspapers devoted extended coverage to their attempt on Baghdad.³⁸⁰ The press now described, in greater detail than they had ever given the campaign hitherto, the journey that had brought Townshend's troops to within striking distance of Baghdad. The celebratory tone of press coverage in the run-up to the battle of Ctesiphon (22-24 November, 1915) described the 6th Division's achievements as remarkable progress made by a small force of British and Indian troops, whose string of uninterrupted, and unlikely, successes had found them, as the papers triumphantly announced, 'less than 50 miles from Bagdad'.³⁸¹

Baghdad, the city of the Abbasid Caliphs, was seen as a suitably high profile target for Townshend's troops. The occupation of the city was a thrilling prospect: a panacea for the stagnation of Allied forces on the Western Front and, as this chapter will discuss, a way to offset the humiliating withdrawal from Gallipoli. Writing in his *Baghdad: City of Peace* (1927), a history of Baghdad, Richard Coke described the city in the following terms:

The fabled capital of the great Caliphs, the wonder town of the *Arabian Nights*, a place known to the dreams of every Western child. Baghdad, where the good

³⁸⁰ Media coverage of the campaign examined in: *Blackwood's Magazine*; *Cornhill Magazine*; *John Bull*; *Illustrated London News*; *Manchester Guardian*; *Spectator*; *Nation*; *The Times*.

³⁸¹ 'The Tigris Expedition', *Manchester Guardian* (Manchester edition only), 17 November 1915, p. 8.

Harun was said to wander in disguise with his minister, Jafar the Barmecide, and sit chatting with his subjects in the coffee houses; Baghdad which suffered a more cruel fate than Rome itself, when the Mongol Tyrant massacred eight hundred thousand people without flinching and the waters of the Tigris ran red with human blood; Baghdad, that lay for centuries neglected, a crumbling, desolate, lifeless thing; Baghdad, the city of a myriad types of men, of wondrous, dark-eyed, close-veiled maids; Baghdad, the home of a million stories of lust and cruelty and passion and achievement and sometimes even humour; the city of the blazing sun by day, the treacherous cold and damp by night; what romance, what fascination in the very name, Baghdad!³⁸²

In this introduction to the city, Coke illustrated the significance of Baghdad in the British imagination. An exotic, yet familiar place, Baghdad would have been well known to British audiences for the reasons he outlined.

As Coke's allusion to 'the great Caliphs' suggests, Baghdad was identified primarily as the seat of the Abbasid caliphate. After the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632, the growing Muslim Empire was ruled by Caliphs. Muhammad was succeeded immediately by his companion Abu Bakr, the first of four Rightly Guided or Rashidun Caliphs, who are so called because they were elected by the elders and approved by the Muslim community. After the murder of Ali, the last of the Rashidun, Muawiyah, the Governor of Syria, became Caliph and established the Umayyad Dynasty. The Umayyad Caliphs ruled from 661 to 750. Under the Umayyads, the Muslim Empire grew and was established as a unified and permanent force with its capital in Damascus. However, the 'Golden Age' of Muslim civilization is considered to have been under the Abbasid Dynasty. The Abbasids derive their name from the first Abbasid Caliph, the prophet's uncle Abu al 'Abbas. Under the Abbasid Dynasty, the capital of the empire was moved to Baghdad (except for a short period under al-Mu'tasim (833-42), when the capital was Samarra in the North of Iraq).

Under the Abbasids, Baghdad grew to be one of the largest cities in the world. The city was built by the second Abbasid Caliph, al-Mansur; he sought to establish a new Abbasid capital where he could entrench the new ruling family's power. Thus, at the centre of Abbasid Baghdad lay the Round City designed to keep its rulers aloof and separate from the populace; it contained the palace, barracks and offices. Markets and residential buildings, which were initially inside the city, were moved outside to protect the Caliph. The city was further improved under the rule of

³⁸² Richard Coke, *Baghdad: The City of Peace* (London: T. Butterworth, 1927), p. 17.

al-Mansur's grandson, Harun al-Rashid, and it was his reign that captured the British imagination. As Richard Coke's description suggests, Harun al-Rashid's role as one of the protagonists in Scheherazade's tales had as much, if not more, to do with his fame in Britain, as his role as Caliph.

Figures for the population of Baghdad in the Abbasid period are as high as one million; this declined rapidly after the Mongol occupation of the city and the destruction of its irrigation system. The period of Mongol rule lasted until the city was conquered by Tamerlane at the beginning of the eleventh century. Baghdad was then ruled by various dynasties for short periods, until it came under Ottoman control in the sixteenth century. As Chapter One discussed, in Britain, the period of Ottoman rule was perceived to have been characterised by stagnation and corruption. Despite this, Baghdad continued to hold great significance in British popular consciousness.

Because Townshend's retreat and subsequent entrapment at Kut al-Amara came in place of his expected march into Baghdad, the story of the siege of Kut was followed closely by British newspapers. Although pride and happiness were quickly replaced with anger and recrimination after the battle of Ctesiphon and retreat to Kut, 'the whole country watched with admiration the gallant struggle' of Townshend and his men.³⁸³ By January 1916, British audiences knew the story of General Townshend and the 6th Division of IEF D well, and held their breath for a quick rescue.

Media and Fictional Representations of the Siege of Kut

Patricia Ethel Stonehouse's romance, *The Gates of Kut*, traces the changing responses to the story of the siege of Kut with accuracy, and is itself a reflection of just how far the siege of Kut al-Amara had entered the British popular consciousness.³⁸⁴ The hero of *The Gates of Kut*, Philip Territt, is injured during an operation with the Tigris Relief force. He returns home on the first hospital ship full of injured men from Mesopotamia. As his ship approaches land, the pilot turns to Territt and his friend and says: 'Half England is on the quay, [...] and the other half at

³⁸³ 'The Story of Kut - Heroic Defence', *The Times*, 1 May 1916, p. 7.

³⁸⁴ Patricia Ethel Stonehouse, [pseud. Lindsay Russell], *The Gates of Kut: A Novel* (London: Cassell & Co, 1917).

Victoria.³⁸⁵ Stonehouse describes the reception awaiting the wounded men from Mesopotamia:

They heard the first cheers as they swung in, ringing cheers that brought a lump to the throat of the bravest man there. They were swinging into port, home at last, following that fussy bantam of a boat, that was clanging its bell importantly and proudly flinging the news ahead as it went:

'The hospital ship from Kut! The hospital ship from Kut!'

The reply came all at once from the land.³⁸⁶

The description of 'half England' eagerly awaiting the return of the hospital ship from Kut reflects the popular interest there was in the Mesopotamian campaign by the time the garrison at Kut had surrendered, in April 1916. The atmosphere described is one of national solidarity, but also of a captivated audience who had become invested in the outcome of a story. The siege of Kut raised the profile of the Mesopotamian campaign, and elevated Townshend's status to remarkable heights. By the time Townshend surrendered on 29 April 1916, he had become a heroic, almost superhuman figure in the British press. This, too, is evidenced by Stonehouse's novel; as the wounded men returning from Mesopotamia approach land at last, the thoughts of the soldiers turn to Charles Townshend:

That brave and gallant gentleman who had held Kut as perhaps no other man on earth would have held it, and who was now in far Mesopotamia with the last of his heroic band. That others, on the black mass of the pier, thought of Townshend at that moment there was no doubt. For a voice cried aloud his name, and the sound of wild cheering followed.

"Townshend! Three cheers for Townshend and his gallant little army!"

And the cheers rang so loud that it seemed as in far-away Baghdad the echo of them must surely be heard, or the very spirit of them reach there and tell the splendid fellows that England had not forgotten. The cheers drowned almost the answering roar of the guns. So the hospital ship from Kut, with its broken freight came home.³⁸⁷

As Stonehouse's description suggests, Townshend and his men had become more than celebrities: they were heroes who had endured all in the defence of Britain's honour. Such is Townshend's popularity that he is on the mind of every person in the crowd who spontaneously burst into cheers at the thought of his conduct of the campaign

³⁸⁵ Stonehouse, p. 256.

³⁸⁶ Stonehouse, p. 257.

³⁸⁷ Stonehouse, pp. 257-8.

and the bravery of his men. Words such as 'brave', 'gallant' and 'heroic' emphasise the image of Townshend and his 'gallant little army' as heroes.

Stonehouse's language creates an image of a brave 'band' of men on an adventure against all the odds. Townshend's force is described as a 'little army' or as a 'heroic band', suggesting that the commander had been at the head of a small, unofficial force. Such language makes the achievements of IEF D appear all the more impressive, and their defeats seem less humiliating. It was admirable that a small, ill-equipped force should have defeated the Turkish army on numerous occasions, and held out against them for months with dwindling supplies, but there was no dishonour in the surrender of such a small force against a much more powerful foe. As will be discussed, the British press would adopt similar strategies in their coverage of the aftermath of Townshend's surrender. Finally, the image of roaring guns reminds the reader of the grandeur of the occasion and of Britain's military power. The guns drown out cheers so loud that Stonehouse's narrator imagines that they might be heard in Baghdad; though temporarily set back, Britain's military supremacy would once again be established in the east, and its guns would literally be heard in Baghdad.

Just as Territt and his comrades could find no fault in Townshend's conduct during the attempt on Baghdad, so the British press and members of both houses of parliament had only praise for Townshend and his men. The papers built an image of Townshend as not only the hero of the Mesopotamian campaign, but also as a man who had spent a lifetime protecting the British Empire. *John Bull* reminded its readers that he was 'the man who held the Chitral forts, and in so doing wrote a glorious page upon our Empire's history'.³⁸⁸ In an article titled 'The Hero of Kut. General Townshend's Record. (From one who knows him)', *The Times* too asserted that he was a fine soldier, from a family of empire-builders, and informed its readers that Townshend had 'leaped into fame as commander of the escort of the British Agent during the siege of Chitral', and 'fought in the Sudan Expedition of 1898'.³⁸⁹ The *Nation* declared that Townshend, 'the hero of Chitral,' was 'not only a competent

³⁸⁸ A.G. Hales, 'SAVE GENERAL TOWNSHEND! IS IT TO BE GORDON AGAIN? – WILL YOU PERMIT IT?', *John Bull*, 19 February 1916, p. 10.

³⁸⁹ 'The Hero of Kut. General Townshend's record. (From one who knows him)', *The Times*, 1 May 1916, p.8.

soldier with the varied experience that our Empire affords, but a compelling personality'.³⁹⁰

In the weeks before Major General Charles Townshend blew up his guns and surrendered the garrison at Kut al-Amara, A. G. Hales's campaign to 'SAVE TOWNSHEND!' reached a crescendo.³⁹¹ Writing in *John Bull*, Hales urged the government to throw all possible resources at the rescue of 'the gallant warrior' and his men, and begged Lord Kitchener to save Townshend as he had avenged Gordon before him.³⁹² Hales was comparing Charles Townshend to General Charles George Gordon who lost his life to the Mahdi's forces after the siege of Khartoum (12 March 1884 to 26 January 1885). Hales made no allusion to the controversy that surrounded the battle of Omdurman in September 1898, evoking only the fact that the Minister for War was perceived to have avenged Gordon's death by defeating the Mahdi's successor, Abdullah al-Taashi.³⁹³ The comparison with Gordon of Khartoum presented Townshend to the British public not just as a brave, heroic soldier, but as someone who had given all, not only to Britain, but specifically in the service of expanding the British Empire.

When the British relieving force arrived in Khartoum, Gordon was found dead, his head allegedly cut off and given to the Mahdi on a stake. Gordon's death caused a national outcry and led to what Roger Owen, in his biography of Lord Cromer (then Proconsul of Egypt), called 'the British obsession with avenging Gordon'.³⁹⁴ In comparing Townshend to 'Gordon of Khartoum', Hales was drawing upon a well-established and highly emotive trope of sacrifice in the service of empire. He was also contributing significantly to what could be described as the British obsession with rescuing Townshend of Kut. Press coverage of the campaign depicted Charles Townshend as a man whose career had prepared him perfectly for his current situation. His role was presented to the British public as upholding Britain's honour and protecting India. This linked the campaign, in the popular consciousness, with the protection and expansion of Britain's Indian empire.

³⁹⁰ 'Events of the Week', *Nation*, 6 May 1916, p.122.

³⁹¹ Hales, 'SAVE GENERAL TOWNSHEND!'.

³⁹² Hales, 'SAVE GENERAL TOWNSHEND!'.

³⁹³ Roger Owen, *Lord Cromer: Victorian Imperialist, Edwardian Proconsul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 301-2.

³⁹⁴ Owen, p. 301.

Although admiration for Townshend and his men was unstinting, pressure on the government to explain how this force had become besieged at Kut was mounting, even before the surrender of the garrison. Hales declared that if Townshend, like Gordon before him, was not rescued in time, he would have been 'butchered on the altar of [the government's] incapacity'.³⁹⁵ Whilst Townshend was held up as an exemplary soldier, the cabinet were merely 'a bunch of laymen who have had the audacity to usurp soldierly powers to gamble with the lives of heroes'.³⁹⁶ Although *John Bull's* coverage of the siege of Kut and its aftermath was extreme, more moderately phrased echoes of the same sentiments could be found in other British publications in the run-up to the surrender at Kut al-Amara. *The Times* reported in February 1916:

When we committed ourselves to the Baghdad adventure we took grave additional risks which were well known to those familiar with this region. Despite the preoccupations of other theatres of war, the country is watching with interest and admiration the gallant stand made by GENERAL TOWNSHEND. He has proved himself over and over again a first-class fighting general.³⁹⁷

It is clear that any blame for the failures resulting from Townshend's retreat and entrapment at Kut would not be laid at the door of General Townshend who, *The Times* declared, had 'proved himself over and over again a first-class fighting general', and whose 'gallant stand' was being watched with 'interest and admiration' by the entire country. *The Times* hinted that the blame lay higher up, with those who had made the decision to advance to Baghdad. It suggested that not only was the government wrong to authorise the advance, because it demanded that Townshend take 'grave additional risks', but that they did so in ignorance, or wilful dismissal, of arguments against such an advance that would have been obvious to anyone with a familiarity with the region. In so doing, the paper suggested, Asquith and his government had been either ill-informed, or simply willing to take unnecessary risks with the lives of 'gallant' soldiers.

After General Gorringe's final attempt to relieve the garrison had failed, the *Spectator* warned that 'a section on the Press will use that failure of our arms as an

³⁹⁵ Hales, 'SAVE GENERAL TOWNSHEND!'.

³⁹⁶ Hales, 'SAVE GENERAL TOWNSHEND!'.

³⁹⁷ 'The Siege of Kut', *The Times*, 9 February 1916, p. 9.

instrument [...] for inducing the people of this country to change their rulers rather than concentrate on the plain duty in front of them – the duty of carrying on the war'.³⁹⁸ But its call for restraint was very much in the minority.

The comments of Earl Kitchener in the House of Lords upon Townshend's surrender were typical of reactions in parliament. Kitchener, one of the few cabinet members who had always objected to the attempt to occupy Baghdad, paid tribute to Townshend and his men;³⁹⁹ he told the House that they had done 'all that was humanly possible to resist to the last, and [...] their surrender reflects no discredit on themselves or on the record of the British and Indian Armies.'⁴⁰⁰ The *Nation's* report on the surrender of the garrison typified the reaction of the British press to the news:

General Townshend has been forced to surrender. He had held out much longer than anyone cognizant with his resources could have thought possible, and before giving in he destroyed his guns and ammunition. The force which passes into Turkish keeping is extremely small, rashly disproportionate to the risks it encountered in striking beyond Kut.⁴⁰¹

In common with other publications, the *Nation's* report unconditionally praised Townshend and his men, and emphasised that their conduct had minimised the damaging effects of the surrender. In a tone very similar to that adopted in *The Times*, the *Nation* pointed out that Townshend's force had been given a task far too large for its capacities. Although his force had always been 'rashly disproportionate to the risks it encountered', Townshend's men had held Kut for an extraordinary length of time, and had destroyed their guns and ammunition. Use of the word 'rash' was an unveiled criticism of the government's decision to approve the advance. The loss of 10,000 men was, according to the *Nation*, of little military significance, as it was 'extremely small'.

Almost as soon as Townshend surrendered, the media began to emphasise the difficulty of the task General Townshend and his troops had been given, and to claim that the force that the country had willed to be rescued, and that 23,000

³⁹⁸ 'Topic of the Day', *Spectator*, 15 April in, p. 485.

³⁹⁹ Douglas Goold, 'Lord Hardinge and the Mesopotamia Expedition and Inquiry, 1914-1917', *The Historical Journal*, 19 (1976), 919-945 (p. 933).

⁴⁰⁰ 'The Defence of Kut' [Debate in House of Lords, 4 May 1916] in *Hansard 1803-2005* <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1916/may/04/the-defence-of-kut#S5LV0021P0_19160504_HOL_23> [accessed 13 January 2009]

⁴⁰¹ 'Events of the Week', *Nation*, 6 May 1916, p. 146.

men had died attempting to relieve, was not particularly significant. *The Times* reassured its readers that:

It is hardly necessary to say that the capitulation of the garrison of Kut has very limited military importance. The numbers involved are relatively small, and Kut itself is merely a squalid little Arab town [...]. The enemy will doubtless exploit the episode to the utmost, but their efforts are already heavily discounted.⁴⁰²

The *Manchester Guardian*, too, reflected that ‘the fall of Kut is a very unpleasant jar to proper pride, but it is not a great military misfortune’.⁴⁰³ The *Nation* went so far as to declare that ‘militarily, the surrender strengthens our position in Mesopotamia’.⁴⁰⁴ This was part of the unstinting support demonstrated by the press for Townshend and his men, but it was also part of a concerted effort to save face in the aftermath of a humiliating military defeat.

The outrage expressed by the press and members of both houses of parliament was directed, instead, at Asquith’s cabinet, who had authorised the advance that had reversed the fortunes of Townshend’s force. *The Times* declared once more that there was ‘universal admiration for the long and brilliant stand which the beleaguered force has made against desperate odds’; this, however, did ‘not in the least excuse the authors of this wretched and quite unnecessary chapter of the war. The responsibility for the decision which has led to the unfortunate capitulation of the garrison of Kut must be probed to the bottom without delay’.⁴⁰⁵ Horatio Bottomley, the editor of *John Bull*, proclaimed that ‘the miserable tragedy of Mesopotamia is to be laid at the feet of His Majesty’s Government, a “tribute” to personal vanity, to political ambition and to ministerial ineptitude’.⁴⁰⁶

The level of anger and frustration expressed in such media coverage against Asquith and his cabinet is echoed in *The Gates of Kut*. Stonehouse’s critique of the government is conducted through the figure of George Marcourt. George, a member of the coalition government, personifies the well-meaning but inept politician. This is evident in his characterisation throughout the novel, and made explicit in the comparison between him and Phillip Territt. Territt is held up as

⁴⁰² ‘The Fall of Kut’, *The Times*, 1 May 1916, p. 9.

⁴⁰³ ‘Dublin and Kut by a Student of the War’, *Manchester Guardian*, 3 May 1916, p. 6.

⁴⁰⁴ ‘Events of the Week’, *Nation*, 6 May 1916, p. 146.

⁴⁰⁵ ‘The Fall of Kut’, *The Times*.

⁴⁰⁶ Horatio Bottomley, ‘I accuse, Wanted, An Imperial Nine - The King Must Rule- Avenge Townshend. By The Editor’, *John Bull* 6th May 1916, p. 7.

everything George Marcourt should have been: young, brave, passionate, intelligent, but most of all – a soldier. Throughout the novel, George Marcourt is implicitly compared to Philip Territt, because, unbeknownst to George, the two men are rivals for Enid's affections. In contrast to the heroic Territt, George cannot see what is right under his nose; there are several instances when Stonehouse's characters chastise George for missing what is obvious. Enid declares that 'the funny thing about George [...] is that he seems to study every bit of the newspaper, and yet often misses things that I see at a glance'.⁴⁰⁷ He is too obtuse to realise what his sister in law, Lady Emma, spots immediately: that Enid and Philip are in love. George does not notice the decline in his wife's health after she and Territt are separated, nor does he notice her illness and weight loss after Territt's death is mistakenly announced by the press. Lady Emma diagnoses him with 'hypermetropia or long sight', and wonders if he is 'blind not see the change in his wife?'⁴⁰⁸

In one passage of the novel Stonehouse's subtle criticism of politicians, through the character of George, is made explicit:

It was really a most momentous time in the history of England because it was whispered that some members were actually earning their salaries – an unprecedented thing. It does not seem possible that such a rumour could be true; but then, when there is a war on many unlikely things do happen.

Anyhow George went a great deal to Westminster, and when Lady Emma once asked him how he liked it, he said, quite sincerely, they had very good meals there indeed.

[...]

If the truth be known, he slept as soundly as the other members during the long prosy speeches, and obeying the coalition commandments, put his trust in the Premier. What else, then, was to be done but eat and sleep in his appointed place? Now that George was ensconced in a very safe seat, Lady Emma Beckenden was growing quite optimistic about the war. It was she who told everybody, with a significant nod of the head, that the eye of the Premier was on George. Possibly it was, for Marcourt snored horribly when he fell asleep.⁴⁰⁹

Stonehouse paints a scathing picture of politicians as useless parasites upon the nation. The narrator sarcastically states that the war had for the first time forced politicians to earn their living, 'an unprecedented thing', but goes on to describe British

⁴⁰⁷ Stonehouse, p. 184.

⁴⁰⁸ Stonehouse, p. 227.

⁴⁰⁹ Stonehouse, pp.180-1.

politicians as men who did nothing but eat well and sleep through long, irrelevant speeches. George only thinks to comment that ‘they had very good meals there indeed’ when Lady Emma asks him how he likes the House of Commons, suggesting that his attention was on his lifestyle and status, rather than important points of policy or government.⁴¹⁰ Finally, Stonehouse’s narrator intimates that the coalition government was merely Asquith’s puppet, and that the prime minister controlled his ministers, personified by the stupid but well-meaning George, to run the country exactly as he pleased.

Sentiments such as these were most closely expressed in Hales’s articles and in Horatio Bottomley’s editorials in *John Bull*. The paper regularly criticised the government’s running of the war; it argued that the men governing would have been more useful in military service, and that the ‘King must rule’ in their place.⁴¹¹ Stonehouse’s characters often echoed the particularly harsh criticism voiced in *John Bull*’s pages. *John Bull* declared that ‘throughout this business the politician has closed his ears to the truth – and buoyed up the nation with groundless hopes’.⁴¹² Several times the novel’s characters and narrator criticise the government for misleading the public, claiming that all was well with Kut when they knew better. Lady Emma Beckendon tells George that the whole nation, including the newspapers, knew full well that the prospects for Kut were not as good as the government’s releases suggested and that:

They’ve known for weeks. George, when you get into Parliament, tell them that this suppression of news is a poor thing, that it serves no good purpose. I wish I were there in your place. I’d tell them that the country is beginning to have as much faith in the Coalition Government as an atheist has in the story of Jonah and the Whale.⁴¹³

The anger felt towards politicians in the aftermath of the siege of Kut was more vehemently expressed in Rudyard Kipling’s 1917 poem *Mesopotamia*.⁴¹⁴ Kipling’s poem paints an unforgiving picture of the politicians who ‘left’ the ‘resolute, the young, /The eager and whole-hearted whom we gave’ to ‘thriftilly to die in their own dung’. The word ‘dung’ suggests that the men had been treated no better than

⁴¹⁰ Stonehouse, p. 181.

⁴¹¹ Bottomley, ‘I accuse’.

⁴¹² Bottomley, ‘I accuse’.

⁴¹³ Stonehouse, pp. 152-3.

⁴¹⁴ Rudyard Kipling, *Mesopotamia by Rudyard Kipling* (New York: Double Day, Page & Co, 1917). No page numbers.

animals, and evokes the reports of the men packed onto transport ships with little or no medical care, which had shocked British audiences. 'Thriftily' reminded readers of the inadequacy of resources for men serving in Mesopotamia as a result of the parsimony of the Indian Government. In a poem that has been described as one of Kipling's 'hate poems',⁴¹⁵ Rudyard Kipling portrays politicians as 'idle-minded overlings' who made an insincere show of remorse whilst they 'thrust for high employments as of old'. The poem is a call for the people of Britain to demonstrate a genuine, lasting anger at the way their men had been treated, and never to allow the politicians whose 'slothfulness' had 'wasted' young lives and 'arrogance/ that slew' to return to power. Kipling demands whether the British people would only 'threaten and be angry for an hour' and stand idly by while the men who allowed their war-heroes, 'the strong men coldly slain/In sight of help denied from day to day' rebuild their careers and be allowed to 'come with years and honour to the grave'.

Once again, these sentiments closely resemble the criticisms made in *John Bull* in the weeks before Townshend's surrender. In an article published on 15 April, typically titled 'The Crime Against Townshend – Butchered to Make a Fool's Holiday', A. G. Hales demanded that the British public made a stand against the government of 'dunces and phrase-makers' who had allowed 'the ablest of British Generals now on active service' and his 'great men to be proud of' to languish in Kut al-Amara, rather than sending 'a proper force in full strength' to their rescue.⁴¹⁶ Hales demanded to know why 'the people of Britain, stand by like a flock of sheep, and do nothing!'⁴¹⁷

Ann Parry has argued that Kipling's poem is a manifestation of the helplessness felt by the civilians left behind at home: 'a helplessness made more bitter by the inaccessibility of politicians and military leaders to censure and, despite all the improvements in communications, by their distance from their loved one'.⁴¹⁸ It is this inaccessibility of politicians that Stonehouse satirises and critiques through the character of George Marcourt, and that Lady Emma warns George against when she

⁴¹⁵ Hilary Brown, *Rudyard Kipling: A New Appreciation* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1945), p. 201

⁴¹⁶ A. G. Hales, 'The Crime Against Townshend – Butchered to Make a Fool's Holiday', *John Bull*, 15 April 1916, p. 8.

⁴¹⁷ Hales, 'The Crime Against Townshend'.

⁴¹⁸ Ann Parry, *The Poetry of Rudyard Kipling: Rousing the Nation* (Birmingham: Open University Press, 1992), p.131.

tells him that 'this suppression of news is a poor thing'.⁴¹⁹ In an article published in September 1915, *The Times* indicated that its limited coverage of the campaign in Mesopotamia was due to lack of information from the Press Bureau. *The Times* commented that the news of Nixon's victory 'will be the more welcome to our readers because of the obstinate silence which the War Office has so long observed over these brilliant feats of arms'.⁴²⁰

News of the inadequacy of medical services after the battle of Ctesiphon had begun to reach London before Townshend's surrender at the end of April. In March 1916, the *Manchester Guardian* reported that Austen Chamberlain had made a statement to the House of Commons acknowledging a 'lamentable breakdown' in medical services.⁴²¹ This confirmed rumours of what Chamberlain now acknowledged to have been an 'inexcusable shortage of medical supplies'.⁴²² Reports of terrible failures in the medical and transport service in Mesopotamia continued to reach London and to be widely reported. Articles by Edmund Candler, detailing the suffering of the men besieged at Kut were also widely circulated, appearing in both *The Times* and in the *Manchester Guardian*. In a section on the men who had survived the siege of Kut subtitled 'Dearth of Medical Comforts', Candler described officers who 'had evidently undergone great privation, and were very thin and emaciated'.⁴²³

At the request of Sir Beauchamp Duff, the Commander in Chief of the Indian Army, the Vincent-Bingley Commission was appointed in March 1916. William Vincent, Major General Bingley and Mr Rinsdale, a representative from the British Red Cross, were sent out to Mesopotamia to investigate alleged failures in the provision of medical care. In addition, the new commander of British and Indian forces in Mesopotamia, Lieutenant General Sir Percy Lake, asked that the Vincent-Bingley Commission also investigated the inadequacy of river transport and allegations that Townshend had expressed reservations before the advance. However, the pressure on the British Government to allow an independent investigation of what had gone wrong in Mesopotamia continued to mount.

⁴¹⁹ Stonehouse, p. 152.

⁴²⁰ 'Sir John Nixon's Victory', *The Times*, 30 September 1915, p. 7.

⁴²¹ 'Our Mesopotamian Troops - An "Inexcusable" Medical Breakdown - Grave Ministerial Statement', *Manchester Guardian*, 23 March 1916, p. 5.

⁴²² 'Our Mesopotamian Troops', *Manchester Guardian*.

⁴²³ 'Prisoners from Kut - Privations of Officers and Men - Letters from Captives' *The Times*, 10 August 1916, p. 5.

In the wake of Townshend's surrender at Kut, a number of revelations by the popular press increased pressure upon the Asquith government to announce a commission of inquiry. One of the most important of these was the revelation that Charles Townshend had protested that the force at his command was insufficient to take Baghdad. Even before the fall of Kut, *John Bull* reported that General Townshend had 'told the authorities that the task was impossible unless he had at least an *army corps of two divisions*'.⁴²⁴ The newspaper suggested that the Secretary of State for India, Austen Chamberlain, must have known about this, and that if that were the case then he had misled the country and was 'not fit for office'.⁴²⁵

At the end of May, *The Times* reported that:

Finding that the Turks had rallied at Ctesiphon after the defeat at Kut, he [Townshend] telegraphed to Sir John Nixon from Azizieh that if it was the desire of the Government to occupy Baghdad, "unless great risk is to be run, it is in my opinion absolutely necessary that the advance from Kut by road should be carried out methodically by two divisions or one Army Corps, or by one division supported closely by another complete division".⁴²⁶

This article, with its quotes from Townshend and other documentary evidence, caused a furore. It was in response to questions in parliament arising from the article that Chamberlain wrote to General Nixon, asking him to forward any communication from Townshend received before the advance on Baghdad. Despite continued assurances that any protests received by Nixon in October 1915 had never reached the India Office, members of parliament demanded to know more.

In addition to these concerns, in July 1916 *The Times* revealed that General Aylmer had been within reach of relieving General Townshend, but had turned back in error. The *Nation's* report was critical of both Aylmer's performance and the way it had been rewarded:

It is admitted that General Aylmer could and ought to have relieved General Townshend when he fell back on March 7, choosing the longest way to replenish his water supplies. The shortest way led to Kut, where he was practically unopposed. But that seems never to have occurred to him; and when he was removed from his command it was for promotion.⁴²⁷

⁴²⁴ Hales, 'The Crime Against Townshend'. Emphasis in the original.

⁴²⁵ Hales, 'The Crime Against Townshend'.

⁴²⁶ 'The Baghdad Advance', *The Times*, 30 May 1916, p.7.

⁴²⁷ 'Events of the Week', *Nation*, 15 July 1916, p. 455.

Public outrage at perceived cover-ups and a string of military and medical failures continued to be voiced by the press and by members of parliament. The government promised to make public papers relating to the Mesopotamia campaign, but failed to do so after advice that their publication would compromise continuing operations. The press were frustrated by the lack of transparency in the government's handling of the events leading up to the siege of Kut.

This frustration was only increased by the fact that it appeared that in July 1916, eight months after Townshend's advance to Baghdad, none of the problems identified had been remedied. The *Nation* summed up popular opinion as expressed in the press in an article in July:

It is more disturbing to hear that the transport difficulty, upon which the supply depends, has not yet been overcome, and there is no possible excuse for the incredible shortage of the medical service or for the unsuitable supplies [...] which do find their way there. The case of 1000 wounded soldiers sent down in a ship with but one medical officer and one orderly in charge requires prompt investigation. The country wants something more than an assurance that "the supply of all immediate necessities" is engaging daily attention. Why were "necessities" ever wanting?⁴²⁸

The *Nation* lamented the fact that the problems with transport had not been resolved, and declared that there was 'no possible excuse' for the apparent lack of adequate medical provision.

In a debate in June 1916, Edwin Montagu, Financial Secretary to the Treasury and later Secretary of State for India, was still being asked to confirm how much the government had known of Townshend's protests. Montagu's frustration was evident in his reply to Joynson Hicks, MP for Twickenham. Referring him to recently published papers where 'he will see that before April last neither the Government of India nor the Secretary of State had any knowledge of the opinion which General Townshend had expressed to Sir John Nixon. Its existence was made known to His Majesty's Government by the Viceroy's telegram of 9th April.'⁴²⁹ Undaunted, Joynson Hicks went on to enquire how much the government had known about the imminent Turkish reinforcements, which had concerned Townshend. His question went to the heart of the concerns that would haunt the rest of Herbert Asquith's premiership:

⁴²⁸ 'Events of the Week', *Nation* 15 July 1916, p. 455.

⁴²⁹ 'Mesopotamia' [House of Commons Debate 26 June 1916] in *Hansard 1803-2005* <<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1916/jun/26/mesopotamia#S5CV0083P0-01818>> [Accessed 13 January 2009]

‘whether the advance upon Bagdad was decided on political rather than military reasons’.⁴³⁰

Many papers and members of parliament were keen to find out whether ‘political’ considerations had been allowed to interfere with sound military planning. In particular, Asquith’s cabinet were accused of authorising an impossible advance on Bagdad to take attention away from the withdrawal at Gallipoli. This criticism became particularly intense after it emerged that Townshend had informed Nixon that he did not believe that he could capture Bagdad with the force at his disposal. *The Times* commented that ‘the veil which concealed Gallipoli has been drawn again on the Tigris ever since the day when Mr. Asquith made his impressive but entirely misleading announcement that our forces were “within measurable distance of Bagdad”’.⁴³¹

Horatio Bottomley wrote a number of scathing editorials in *John Bull*, in which he accused the government of a cover-up:

I accuse His Majesty’s Government of using Mesopotamia as a set off for the gruesome and ghoulis failure of Gallipoli. I repeat that the cabinet was warned that it was a forlorn hope, and I declare that in spite of the protests of the soldier, our wretched “statesmen” insisted that the gamble of Gallipoli was to be covered by a possible victory at Bagdad – a victory which they were warned was beyond human accomplishment. [...] Here you see the politicians gamble. Before we lowered our flag to the Turks in Gallipoli we were to wave it victoriously in the breeze at Bagdad. A pretty idea!⁴³²

Like Patricia Stonehouse’s novel, Bottomley’s editorial unfavourably compared the ‘soldier’ with ‘our wretched ‘statesmen’; he accused the government of using Townshend and his troops as a decoy for failures in Gallipoli. In a debate on 18 July 1916, the prime minister was still reassuring angry MPs that:

Important from the political point of view as the campaign in that particular aspect undoubtedly was, from first to last, political has never been allowed to override military considerations. Every step that has been taken has been taken by the Government on the consentient advice of all its military authorities.⁴³³

Under unstinting pressure from both houses of parliament and the press, however, the government announced two parliamentary commissions to

⁴³⁰ ‘Mesopotamia’ [House of Commons Debate 26 June 1916] in *Hansard 1803-2005*.

⁴³¹ ‘The Mystery of Mesopotamia’, *The Times*, 24 March 1916, p.9.

⁴³² Bottomley, ‘I Accuse’.

⁴³³ ‘Statement by Prime Minister’, [House of Commons Debate 18 July 1916] in *Hansard 1803-2005* <<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1916/jul/18/statement-by-prime-minister#S5CV0084P0-03633>> [Accessed 13 January 2009].

investigate failures in the Mesopotamian and Dardanelles expeditions. Once more, the *Spectator* was alone in its defence of the government. It warned that commissions of inquiry during the war would only 'make every officer in a high position feel that he fights with a halter round his neck. That is not a feeling which liberates energy and inspires initiative'.⁴³⁴ Other publications warmly welcomed Asquith's announcement, and declared that the commission would finally shed light on the failings that had led to a humiliating military defeat, and the inexcusable failures in medical supplies and transportation, which had led to the suffering of so many British and Indian troops.

The Mesopotamia Commission

The Mesopotamia Commission was appointed in August 1916 and chaired by Lord George Hamilton. The other commissioners were Richard Hely-Hutchinson (the Earl of Donoughmore), Lord Hugh Cecil, Sir Archibald Williamson, John Hodge, Commander Josiah Wedgewood, Admiral Sir Cyprian Bridge, and General Sir Neville Lyttleton. The Commission's remit was to enquire:

Into the origin, inception, and conduct of operations of war in Mesopotamia, including the supply of drafts, reinforcements, ammunition, and equipment of the troops and fleet, the provision for the sick and wounded, and the responsibility of those departments of Government whose duty it has been to minister to the wants of the forces employed in that theatre of war.⁴³⁵

By the time the Commission's report was published, many of the criticisms made by the commissioners might well have been seen as irrelevant: Herbert Asquith had been succeeded by David Lloyd George; Lord Hardinge had been replaced as Viceroy of India by Lord Chelmsford, and had himself chaired the Commission into the Easter Rising, which published its findings in June 1916. Sir Beauchamp Duff had been replaced by Sir Charles Carmichael Monro, 1st Baronet of Bearcrofts, as Commander in Chief of the Indian army. And, as Frederick Moberly noted in the official history of the campaign, 'it was known that most of the shortcomings complained of were in the course of being

⁴³⁴ 'The Mesopotamian Inquiry', *Spectator*, 29 July 1916, p. 123.

⁴³⁵ Mesopotamia Commission Archives, British Library, London. L/MIL/17/15/65/1, p. 3. (Hereafter Mesopotamia Commission Archives).

remedied'.⁴³⁶ Most importantly, by the time the Commission's report was published, not only had General Nixon been replaced as commander of forces in Mesopotamia, first by Sir Percy Lake and later by Lieutenant General Sir Stanley Maude, but Maude's forces had succeeded in capturing Baghdad in March 1917. Moberly has criticised the Commission for its failure to apply rules of evidence and to interview witnesses in Mesopotamia or India. He argued that:

The Commission did not always appreciate the true significance of what it learnt [...]. [Generally] speaking, the members of the Commission were lacking in the technical and up-to-date knowledge of military operations and military war organisation required in an enquiry of this nature. It is undoubtedly true that, in a military sense, its report was incomplete and in a few cases inaccurate.⁴³⁷

Nevertheless, such was the continued interest in the events surrounding the authorisation of Townshend's attempt to take Baghdad in November 1915, that the British papers published the findings of the Mesopotamia Commission and Commander Wedgwood's dissenting opinion in great detail, and devoted several pages to its analysis in the weeks after the report's publication in the summer of 1917.

The Mesopotamia Commission accepted the Vincent-Bingley Commission's findings that Surgeon General Hathaway had been remiss in his oversight of medical services in Mesopotamia, and included a copy of the Commissioners' findings in their own report. The majority report of the Commission found that blame for the premature advance to Baghdad lay predominantly with General Nixon, on whose advice and reassurance the British government had authorised the advance to Baghdad. They described Nixon's command of forces in Mesopotamia as a 'landmark', and argued that he had driven the campaign forward without regard for the limitations imposed by the geography of Mesopotamia or the numbers under his command.⁴³⁸ The Commissioners found that Nixon had not communicated well with his subordinates, and that an unhealthy culture of 'secretiveness' had impaired his ability to command.⁴³⁹ They concluded:

⁴³⁶ F.J. Moberly, *The Campaign in Mesopotamia, 1914-1918*, History of the Great War Based on Official Documents, 4 vols (London: H.M.S.O, 1923-27), Vol. 4, p. 29.

⁴³⁷ Moberly, *The Campaign in Mesopotamia*, Vol. 4, p. 30.

⁴³⁸ *Royal Commission Appointed by Act of Parliament to Enquire into the Operation of War in Mesopotamia. Reports etc. Report Together with a Separate Report by J. Wedgwood, and Appendices* (London: H.M.S.O, 1917), p. 16. (Hereafter Mesopotamia Commission Report).

⁴³⁹ Mesopotamia Commission Report, p. 109.

He underrated the difficulty of transporting reinforcements, as they arrived, from the port of embarkation to the scene of action, and he seriously underestimated the number of his opponents and miscalculated the dates at which they would arrive. Sufficient allowance was not made either in London or in Simla for the probability of such miscalculations. [...] Though grave blame must be attached to Sir John Nixon for his excessive optimism, those who shared in that optimism cannot be wholly free from criticism.⁴⁴⁰

Those who had 'shared in that optimism' included the Viceroy of India, Lord Hardinge, Austen Chamberlain, Sir Edmund Barrow (secretary of the India Office), and the war cabinet, because they too had recommended the authorisation of the advance to Baghdad. As a result of the Commission's findings and in response to continued criticisms of the early conduct of the campaign in Mesopotamia, Hardinge offered his resignation from the role of permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office three times; it was refused by Arthur Balfour on each occasion. Chamberlain did, however, resign his post as Secretary of State for India in July 1917 in response to the Commissioners' criticisms of his role in the authorisation of the advance to Baghdad.

The Commissioners were particularly critical of the way the campaign had been run. They concluded that the split between ultimate control of the expeditionary force in London and day-to-day running in India had been unworkable. They criticised the 'strong economy campaign', which they concluded had characterised the Indian army in the years that preceded the campaign in Mesopotamia, and had left it incapable of facing a foreign power.⁴⁴¹ The Commissioners particularly criticised the failure of those in charge of the campaign in Mesopotamia to appreciate the need for river transportation. Mesopotamia's rivers were too shallow, for long periods of the year, to be navigated by any of the Royal Navy's crafts, but special vehicles were not ordered until far too late. This hindered the care and evacuation of the wounded after the battle of Ctesiphon, and prevented quick transportation of reinforcements to the Tigris relief force in 1916. They criticised Lord Kitchener's reforms of the Indian army, which combined the posts of military member of the Viceroy's council with the role of Commander in Chief. The Commissioners found that this placed too much pressure on Duff, who had been too swamped with bureaucratic duties to visit the battlefield himself.

⁴⁴⁰ Mesopotamia Commission Report, p. 108.

⁴⁴¹ Mesopotamia Commission Report, p. 10.

Analysis of the report of the Mesopotamia Commission has predominantly focused on the apportionment of blame for the premature advance on Baghdad, the inadequacy of medical provision and the problematic split of the running of the campaign between the Government of India and the India Office in London. These aspects of the Commissioners' report have been treated in depth in many of the histories of the campaign, notably Paul Davis's *Ends and Means: The Mesopotamia Campaign and Commission*. This chapter will deal specifically with one aspect of the campaign, found throughout the evidence heard by the Commission but conspicuously absent in the findings of the Commissioners as they were published in 1917: the emphasis on prestige, which had been at the heart of calls for a commission of inquiry.

Although the Commissioners were concerned throughout their investigations to find out what role 'prestige' had played in the authorisation of the advance to Baghdad, they made little comment upon this in their final report. They noted only that:

The loss of prestige associated with these military failures was less than might have been anticipated, owing to the deep impression made, throughout and beyond the localities where the combat occurred, by the splendid fighting power of the British and Indian forces engaged.⁴⁴²

However, the archives of the Mesopotamia Commission reveal an emphasis on the preservation of British 'prestige in the East' that was not reflected in the Commissioners' findings. The men who gave evidence to the Commission indicated that the desire to protect British prestige by ensuring military success in Mesopotamia was at the heart of the rationale for the campaign itself, and, in particular of the authorisation of the advance towards Baghdad. This has, to some extent, been acknowledged by histories of the Mesopotamian campaign. Briton Cooper Busch argues that prestige was one of the motivations for sending a force to the Gulf in November 1915, and identifies the 'issue of "face"', coupled with the possible benefits of a small, victorious campaign in Mesopotamia [...] [as] the main cause for the campaign in the first instance – and for much of subsequent policy both civil and military'.⁴⁴³ Nevertheless, as David French has argued in 'The Dardanelles, Mecca and Kut: Prestige as a factor in British Military Strategy, 1914-1916', the importance of

⁴⁴² Mesopotamia Commission Report, p. 111.

⁴⁴³ Busch, pp. 8-9.

prestige as a factor in determining British policy in the Middle East between 1914 and 1916 has been underestimated.⁴⁴⁴

British Prestige in the East

Sir Edmund Barrow, Military Secretary of the India Office, told the Commissioners that 'from the very beginning of these operations, from the very inception [...] the operations in Mesopotamia were desirable to protect India'.⁴⁴⁵ The protection of British prestige was perceived, by those in charge of directing the campaign in Mesopotamia, as key to the protection of both Britain's existing empire and its future relations with the Arabs. Although it is clear that the men who used the term prestige understood its connotations, the term requires some definition for the modern reader. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines prestige in two ways. It states that it means both 'a conjuring trick; a deception, an imposture' and, more commonly:

Impressive or overawing influence, glamour. Subsequently: influence or reputation derived from achievements, associations, or character, or (esp.) from past success; a person's standing in the estimation of others.

The concept of prestige in this period encapsulated both of these ideas. It was a 'conjuring trick' that enabled thousands of British people to rule over millions of native peoples with the illusion of massive, ever-present military power, but it was also power derived from a reputation based on past British success and continued control over vast swathes of the world.

David French argues that 'prestige was both the cement which supported the foundations of [British] rule [in India] and the ideology which they used to explain their superiority over the millions of people they ruled'.⁴⁴⁶ This definition of prestige conceives of the concept as a belief in the inherent superiority of the British race, which served as a justification for empire. However, French argues that prestige was also a myth for the colonised peoples: an alternative to military power that helped to keep the empire safe. For French, prestige was a superiority that was projected in

⁴⁴⁴ David French, 'The Dardanelles, Mecca and Kut: Prestige as a Factor in British Eastern Strategy, 1914-1916', *War & Society* (1987), 53-55.

⁴⁴⁵ Mesopotamia Commission Archives, L/MIL/17/15/65/2, p. 39.

⁴⁴⁶ French, p. 46.

order to keep colonial subjects convinced that British rule could not be undermined. He argued that this was achieved through a self-imposed segregation of the British communities in the colonies, which precluded 'intimate relations' of any kind between the races in order that 'the mask of British moral superiority could never be allowed to slip.'⁴⁴⁷

Though Edward Said does not discuss the concept of prestige directly, he describes how British administrators in the colonies were made to retire at the age of 55, so that:

No Oriental was ever allowed to see a Westerner as he aged and degenerated, just as no Westerner needed ever to see himself, mirrored in the eyes of the subject race, as anything but a vigorous, rational, ever-alert young Raj.⁴⁴⁸

What Said describes here is both aspects of the concept of prestige as it functioned in Britain's colonies. It was necessary to remove representatives of the ruling race before they became old and frail, in order that orientals would only ever see them in their prime. But it was also important to maintain the belief in this superiority for the colonisers themselves: 'no Westerner needed ever to see himself, mirrored in the eyes of the subject race, as anything but a vigorous, rational, ever-alert young Raj'.

Ann Laura Stoler has similarly argued that sexual relations between colonisers and colonised peoples were strictly delineated because they threatened the prestige of the ruling peoples. She writes that *métissage* was forbidden because it was 'conceived as a dangerous source of subversion' and 'was seen as a threat to white prestige, an embodiment of European degeneration and moral decay'.⁴⁴⁹ Stoler's use of the word prestige conceives of it as the projection of a moral and racial superiority, which was threatened by *métissage* because the offspring of colonisers and colonised were perceived to degenerate the superior race.

In his article 'The Imperial Idea: Ideas of Honor in British India', Steven Patterson uses the word prestige synonymously with the word honour, to describe the ideology that informed British rule in India.⁴⁵⁰ Like Stoler, he links prestige with ideas

⁴⁴⁷ French, p. 47.

⁴⁴⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* [1978](London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 42.

⁴⁴⁹ Ann Laura Stoler, 'Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusion in Colonial Southeast Asia' in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* ed. by Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 198-237, p. 190.

⁴⁵⁰ Steven Patterson, 'The Imperial Idea: Ideas of Honor in British India', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 8.1 (2007), <<http://muse.jhu.edu/>> [accessed 27 November 2008].

of sexual segregation, arguing that because there was 'no solid division between public and private spheres in the Raj [...], women were charged with upholding the dignity and prestige of imperial rule'.⁴⁵¹ Patterson also argues that 'the Raj ostensibly came to depend on the prestige of the ruling race, much like the ability of the ICS [Indian Civil Service] officer to walk through his district alone, unarmed, and without fear'.⁴⁵² Prestige, in this context, was the acknowledgement by colonised peoples of an implicit superiority, which served to guarantee the safety of British representatives of the empire abroad. Although Patterson does not define the term prestige, his use of the word synonymously with 'honour' comes closest to the *OED*'s definition of it as a person's, or in this instance a country's, standing in the estimation of others.

However, as this use of the term suggests, prestige was more complex than this definition implies in the imperial context. The term prestige was also invested with a belief in a racial hierarchy, with white, British men at the top. It is this use of the word prestige as an important part of imperial Britain's ruling apparatus that comes closest to the ways in which the term was understood in Britain in the early twentieth century.

In a debate in the House of Commons on the British government's response to the assassination of the Egyptian prime minister, Boutros Pasha, in June 1910, the Conservative Member of Parliament for Rugby, Mr John Baird (later Viscount Stonehaven), declared that Britain's position in Egypt, and indeed the Empire, depended on the preservation of Britain's prestige. Baird told the House that 'in these [Oriental] countries we live on prestige'.⁴⁵³ Baird was objecting strenuously to rumours that 'natives no longer need dismount when they meet a British officer in the Soudan'.⁴⁵⁴ He stressed that although it might seem like an insignificant matter to people who had little 'experience of the Oriental', it was essential to establishing the appropriate level of respect between British officers and the people they ruled.⁴⁵⁵ The word prestige, for Baird, was synonymous with respect or deference, which he believed necessary to ensure that 'Orientals' followed British 'teaching', and which

⁴⁵¹ Patterson, (para. 12 of 41).

⁴⁵² Patterson, (para. 11 of 41).

⁴⁵³ 'CONSOLIDATED FUND (No. 2) BILL' [House of Commons Debate 13 June 1910] *Hansard 1803-2005* <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1910/jun/13/consolidated-fund-no-2-bill#S5CV0017P0_19100613_HOC_373> [2 February 2009]. (Hereafter 'CONSOLIDATED FUND (No. 2) BILL')

⁴⁵⁴ 'CONSOLIDATED FUND (No. 2) BILL'.

⁴⁵⁵ 'CONSOLIDATED FUND (No. 2) BILL'.

ensured the safety and success of those charged with Britain's civilizing mission in Egypt and the Sudan. 'You cannot have the Soudan controlled in a civilised way by a small body of British officers' Baird asserted, 'without respect for British authority being maintained'.⁴⁵⁶ That authority was, for him, maintained by acts that demonstrated not only the respect he believed should be accorded to a British officer by those inferior to him, but also served to reinforce the social and racial hierarchies that ensured the continued peaceful maintenance of the Empire.

Sir Henry Craik, Scottish Unionist Member of Parliament for Glasgow and Aberdeen Universities, joined Baird in lamenting the loss of prestige inherent in not requiring 'Orientals' to show deference to British officers by dismounting. Craik told the House that 'no one who has lived in the Soudan will for a moment deny that that is a necessity for preserving our prestige'.⁴⁵⁷ Inherent in Craik's statement was the suggestion that those who argued that such practices were old fashioned and unnecessary had not spent time in the colonies, and so could not really understand 'the Oriental'. He went on to explain that prestige was the only way that young British administrators were able to maintain control over large groups of native peoples:

Are you lightly going to cast away any usage which increases the prestige, the dignity, and the safety of these officials? We cannot suppose that they are affected in the same way as we are affected. To us such a ceremony as returning a salute means absolutely nothing. We treat it as a trifle. But do not think that it is a trifle to the Oriental mind. Abandon it, and the Oriental thinks that you are afraid of him, and that you wish him to show no respect. There is a very small boundary in Oriental minds between lack of respect and the advancement of dangerous resistance to your power.⁴⁵⁸

Craik's argument was that those who criticised such practices simply did not understand the East. As a result, they could not appreciate the impact of such a loss of prestige on 'Oriental minds'. Craik's comments made explicit the implicit link between prestige and the idea of the Oriental mind, reminding his audience that they did not think in the same way as 'the Orientals'. 'The Oriental', he argued, would draw grave conclusions if such practices, which increased British prestige by reminding them of the hierarchy of the races, were abandoned. Henry Craik's point was simple: any loss of British prestige – even one that might seem small to those living in the comfort and

⁴⁵⁶ 'CONSOLIDATED FUND (No. 2) BILL'.

⁴⁵⁷ 'CONSOLIDATED FUND (No. 2) BILL'.

⁴⁵⁸ 'CONSOLIDATED FUND (No. 2) BILL'.

'civilization' of Britain, would have a direct impact on Britain's hold on its colonies, and on the safety of British administrators in those colonies.

One of the features of Orientalism, as Said elaborated it, is a homogenisation of peoples considered Oriental. Said cites the example of the former Proconsul of Egypt, Lord Cromer who, Said maintains, believed that his experience in India and Egypt made him an authority on all Orientals. Said argues that Cromer was able to believe this because he understood the peoples he called Orientals to share fundamental characteristics. He concludes that for Cromer, 'although circumstances might differ slightly here and there, [ruling the Oriental] was almost everywhere nearly the same. This was, of course because Orientals were almost everywhere the same'.⁴⁵⁹ Another crucial aspect of Orientalism, for Said, is that such homogenisation was based on a belief in the West's knowledge of the Orient: the Orientalist believed that he knew the Orient better than the Orientals themselves, from his own experiences but also with reference to specialists such as Ernest Renan.⁴⁶⁰

In a sense Orientalism was a library or archive of information commonly and, in some of its aspects, unanimously held. What bound the archive together was a family of ideas and a unifying set of values proven in various ways to be effective. These ideas explained the behaviour of Orientals; they supplied Orientals with a mentality, a genealogy, an atmosphere; most important, they allowed Europeans to deal with and even to see Orientals as a phenomenon possessing regular characteristics.⁴⁶¹

It was exactly this kind of belief in a 'family of ideas' that 'explained the behaviour of Orientals', supplying them with a 'mentality', that allowed Craik and his colleagues to pronounce with such confidence the outcome of any threat to British prestige.

The debate, the second reading in the House of Commons of the Consolidated Fund (No.2) Bill, on 13 June 1910, in which these men deliberated upon the importance of British prestige in ruling Egypt, is the same one that Said cites in making his well-known argument that Arthur Balfour's position of authority on Oriental matters was derived from his confidence in his knowledge of 'the Orient'. As Craik's comments indicate, the concept of 'the Oriental mind' was central to the way in which prestige was understood to function.

⁴⁵⁹ Said, pp. 37-8.

⁴⁶⁰ Said, p. 39

⁴⁶¹ Said, p. 42.

Craik spoke authoritatively about the impact any damage to British prestige would have upon the Oriental mind. British politicians, administrators and military commanders could only strive to preserve British prestige if they felt that they understood the Oriental mind. Only with this understanding could they predict what would adversely affect an Oriental's perception of Britain. In the rationale that informed the decisions of the India Office there was a grouping of Arab and Indian opinion that suggests that the populations of these regions were treated as a homogenous group. One of the reasons for the continued escalation of operations in Mesopotamia was the belief that any cessation in activity would be perceived as weakness by both Arabs and Indians. Barrow wrote to Lord Crewe, then Secretary of State for India, that 'it is advisable to decide what should be the next step, as a policy of passive inactivity is to be deprecated if we are to continue to *impress the Arab and Indian world* with our ability to defeat all designs against us'.⁴⁶²

The belief that British officials understood the Orient better than the Orientals themselves was central to the debate on the importance of British prestige. Said describes the way in which Orientalism defined an Oriental 'mentality', but he does not discuss the concept of the 'Oriental mind', or that of prestige specifically. Yet both of these ideas were crucial to the parliamentary debate that he analyses in *Orientalism*. Mr Edward Wood, MP for Ripon and later Viscount Halifax, argued passionately about the meaning of the word prestige:

That is not my meaning when I use the word "prestige". My meaning is that the subordinate race should by all means be fairly treated, and that there: [sic] should be no sense of injustice. But given that condition, surely you are in a position to insist that the black races must and can only be treated as subordinate to the race charged with the government of their country for the time being. The time may come, and I hope it will come, when those races with whose government we are now charged may be in a position to assume the control of their own fortunes, and may be able to work out their own destiny. When that time is reached, I am sure that all parties in this country will be prepared to assist them when they make the attempt. To encourage them to make that attempt, however, when they are in the condition of political children is not only to court disaster to those engaged in the government of the country, but it is to court disaster in one of the most valued possessions of this country, and bring into most serious jeopardy the white, races wherever they are in contact with the black races.⁴⁶³ (sic.)

⁴⁶² Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/4, Volume IV Appendices, *Papers Handed in by General Sir. E. Barrow*, p. 10. My emphasis

⁴⁶³ 'CONSOLIDATED FUND (No. 2) BILL'.

Wood's understanding of the term prestige was very much grounded in his belief in the civilising mission. Like Cromer, who argued in 'The Government of Subject Races' that the people ruled by Britain were 'in *statu pupillari*',⁴⁶⁴ Wood believed that 'the subordinate race[s]' were 'in a condition of political children'. In common with Craik and Baird, Wood feared that any action that threatened Britain's prestige would 'bring into most serious jeopardy the white races wherever they are in contact with the black races'. Said's analysis of this debate in the House of Commons elucidates one side of an argument about how to govern Britain's empire. Certainly 'knowing the Oriental' was central to all the arguments that followed, and underpinned the concepts of 'prestige' and of the 'Oriental mind'. Although neither of these concepts could function without a firm belief that occidental statesmen understood the orient, the importance of 'prestige' to the debate on the best way to rule Egypt reveals an awareness of the vulnerability and precariousness of Britain's position in the east: an awareness that the confident statements of men like Cromer and Balfour did not reveal, and that the pressures of the First World War, less than a decade later, would bring into starker relief.

The importance of the concept of the Oriental mind to the running of the Mesopotamian campaign was most clearly expressed by Sir Arthur Hirtzel, political secretary of the India Office. In his evidence to the Mesopotamia Commission, Hirtzel stressed that in terms of Anglo-Arabian relations, it was the 'side shows', the campaigns in the Middle East, that were most important. He argued that:

People have talked about this as a subsidiary theatre of operations. In a sense it is, but when Turkey entered the war the war changed its nature for us altogether. We [were] then fighting an Oriental Power and a Moslem Power, and it has always seemed to me and to others essential that we should defeat Turkey, not a collapse of Turkey because Germany is beaten, but that we should beat Turkey in the field.⁴⁶⁵

Hirtzel's confidence in what was needed to ensure continued good relations with the Arabs during, and after, the war was based on his belief that he understood the Oriental mind, and could, therefore, accurately predict the impact of different scenarios upon the future behaviour of Arabs. Hirtzel's emphasis upon the need to

⁴⁶⁴ Evelyn Baring, Earl of Cromer, 'The Government of Subject Races' in *Political and Literary Essays 1908-1913* (London: Macmillan, 1913), pp. 3-53 (p. 12).

⁴⁶⁵ Mesopotamia Commission Archives, L/MIL/17/15/65/2, p. 87.

defeat the Ottomans in their own territory was predicated on the belief, expressed in the Political Department's *Memorandum to the Interdepartmental Committee*, that 'Orientals are impressed by tangible success, which can be measured in square miles and demonstrated on the map.'⁴⁶⁶

The perception that the 'Orientals' could understand power only if it was demonstrated overtly and locally meant that British military victories in the Middle East were seen as extremely effective in winning Arab support. Conversely, inactivity, or actual defeats, in the east were perceived to be all the more damaging because they would have a greater impact upon 'the Oriental mind'. Nixon wrote to Chamberlain urging the hasty authorisation of the advance to Baghdad on this basis. He stressed that even a withdrawal from Townshend's position at Azizyah back to Kut would be construed as defeat, and complained that:

The enemy and the whole tribes will place their own construction on such a move, and advance on Kut-el-Amara as he did on Amara in July last [...]. Then a powerful section of the tribes who had already submitted to us rejoined the Turks, and has been a continual source of trouble until British prestige was re-established at the Victory of Kut-el-Amara. The Arab tribes now regard us as irresistible, and have been coming in from all directions to make submission; but if we withdraw they will probably behave as before.⁴⁶⁷

Nixon asserted that the victories achieved by Townshend's troops had restored British prestige, and that this had made British forces seem 'irresistible' to the Arab tribes, who were 'coming in from all directions to make submission'. Nixon, like Arthur Hirtzel, believed that British 'prestige' had been re-established through military victories, and that only through continued military success could he guarantee the continued 'submission' of the 'tribes'.

David French argues that the idea of prestige was also manifested in ostentatious architecture; pomp and circumstance gave the impression of affluence and grandeur and, therefore, of power.⁴⁶⁸ These can be seen as akin to the 'theatrical' or 'ritual' displays of power, which Bernard Cohn maintains were used by European

⁴⁶⁶ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/10, Appendices, Appendix VI: *Memorandum by the Political Department of the India Office for the Interdepartmental Committee*.

⁴⁶⁷ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/4, Volume IV Appendices, *Papers Handed in by General Sir. E. Barrow*, p. 33.

⁴⁶⁸ French, p. 47.

powers to assert their power over their subjects, both at home and abroad, from the eighteenth century onwards.⁴⁶⁹ Such displays were used to awe colonised peoples, and were substitutes for military displays of power. Arthur Hirtzel expressed exactly this idea when he told the commissioners that Britain had only two choices in how to rule and maintain its empire: 'prestige and large military forces'.⁴⁷⁰ In 1915, Captain Harold Dickson of the 29th Lancers was invalided to India. He continued to follow the progress of his men, and to write home to his mother of his recovery and life in India. He wrote to her on 11 June 1915:

As regards myself, I am quite strong and well again & even took part in a dance we had here in the club last week. You may be surprised to hear of such gaieties out here in the midst of almost universal sorrow & at such serious times. You must remember that it is partly a duty on our part which the government encourages out here. You see the natives of India are a most panicky crowd, & those who are not panicky are awaiting in hopes of a British defeat –1 they belong to the seditious ones. Both classes take their cue from us English. The former class would get terribly despondent & the latter distinctly troublesome were we to go about with long faces & grow pessimistic at affairs in general.

Obviously our duty out here in each & every circumstance is to 'keep smiling' & remain 'merry and bright'. As a result it is wonderful how cheerful & optimistic we all are out here. There is just one thing we all want to see & that is universal service at home.⁴⁷¹

Dickson was clearly uncomfortable with the relative luxury that he and his colleagues were enjoying in India. He strove to justify what might have sounded like an offensively ostentatious lifestyle at a time when his own friends and colleagues were dying in the service of their country, or suffering unbearable wartime conditions. He explained to his mother that such luxuries were necessary to ensure the continued stability of Britain's Indian empire. In other words, he and his colleagues felt it their duty to keep up appearances, even at their darkest times, because not to do so might reveal the human face of the imperialists and the weakness of the imperial power. In French's words, what Dickson was trying to explain to his mother was that 'ballrooms were cheaper than battleships or battalions'.⁴⁷²

⁴⁶⁹ Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 3.

⁴⁷⁰ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/2, p. 87

⁴⁷¹ Harold Richard Patrick Dickson, Middle East Centre Archives, St Antony's College, Oxford. M/S letters, GB165-0085, Box 1, File 3A, 11 June 1915. (Hereafter Dickson)

⁴⁷² French, p. 47.

The panic about Indian security, evident in the statements of many of those who testified to the Mesopotamia Commission, led the Commissioners to ask Arthur Hirtzel whether 'prestige' was an 'Indian disease'.⁴⁷³ This zeal to protect British prestige stemmed, in large part, from the fact that those in charge of protecting Britain's Indian Empire felt that illusion of prestige was all that remained; they no longer had the overwhelming military force with which they could protect India, only the reputation for it. Hardinge and Duff stressed over and over again that India no longer had the troops to defend the Raj in the event of an uprising. Prestige was literally all they had left.

Prestige was seen primarily as a way to protect Britain's Indian empire from both 'German intrigues' and 'Mohammedan' uprisings. It was widely accepted that India could only be kept safe if British prestige was maintained in the Eastern theatres of war. India itself was seen as a hotbed of militant Islamic activity waiting to ignite. French argues that after the Indian Rebellion of 1857, 'the British saw Islam as perhaps the single most potential source of danger to their rule'.⁴⁷⁴ It was widely believed that if British prestige was allowed to decline in the Middle East, it would impact directly upon the safety of India. British officials in London and India conducted the Mesopotamian campaign on the basis that the neutrality of Persia could only be maintained if Britain continued to wield influence in the Middle East, and that such influence was itself underpinned by British prestige. If this was allowed to decline, Persia would ally itself with the enemy, Afghanistan would follow suit, the Afghan Amir would lose his tentative grasp on power and the Muslim tribes would flood over the unprotected Indian North-West Frontier.

Austen Chamberlain wrote in his statement to the Commission that the authorisation of the advance to Baghdad came as a relief to him because:

I was anxious as to the effect of the German-Turkish intrigues and emissaries in Persia and of the unsettled condition of that country upon Afghanistan and the Indian frontier. It must be borne in mind that the situation in Persia was intimately bound up with the situation in Mesopotamia and that the situation in Persia itself was a menace to the security of the Indian frontier.⁴⁷⁵

Alternatively, and perhaps all the more worryingly for British officials in India, the declaration of *Jehad* from Afghanistan would incite Indian Muslims themselves against

⁴⁷³ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/2, p. 87.

⁴⁷⁴ French, p. 47.

⁴⁷⁵ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/3, p. 797.

British rule, and Muslims in the Indian army would mutiny. French writes: 'a Moslem uprising would be doubly dangerous because the British relied heavily on the Moslem community to provide recruits for the Indian army'.⁴⁷⁶

It is clear that British officials were uneasy about Britain's ability to continue to rule India in this period. In his statement to the Mesopotamia Commission, Lord Hardinge stressed India's military vulnerability. He stated that the period during which Indian troops were engaged in operations in Mesopotamia had been one of the most turbulent in India itself. India's North West frontier had been under heavy attack:

Although during the previous three years there had been no operations of any importance on the North-West frontier, there were between the 29th November, 1914, and the 5th September, 1915 no less than seven serious attacks made on the North West frontier. [...] In fact it may be said that, during the most critical period of the war, India successfully carried out the greatest military operations on the frontier since the frontier campaign of 1897.⁴⁷⁷

Hardinge also argued that India was internally unstable and rife with conspiracies. In his view, insurgents threatened to overpower a country that had been 'bled absolutely white' of troops in the first few weeks of the war.⁴⁷⁸ For Hardinge, as the advance to Baghdad was being contemplated, the situation in India was critical. He explained further in his statement to the Commission that:

It is unnecessary to say much of the conspiracies at Delhi, Lahore, and elsewhere, which were stifled during the war, but the unrest in the Punjab in the early spring of 1915 [...] necessitating the arrest of no less than 3,500 agitators, required the utmost watchfulness and preparation on the part of the military authorities, and the German conspiracy, planned to break out last Christmas Day [...] required careful watching and co-ordination of the military and naval forces to render it abortive.⁴⁷⁹

Hardinge's feelings were echoed by Sir Beauchamp Duff, Commander in Chief of the Indian army. In his evidence to the Commission, Duff was asked if 'the operations in Mesopotamia at all affected the dangers of an attack from the north-west frontier', to

⁴⁷⁶ French, p. 48.

⁴⁷⁷ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/3, p. 771.

⁴⁷⁸ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/3, p. 765.

⁴⁷⁹ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/3, p. 772.

which he replied: 'very much'.⁴⁸⁰ He went on to state that the danger of invasion through the North West frontier was:

A distinct and very considerable danger from which we were only relieved by the success of the Ameer in holding his country much against the will of the country. There is no question that the Afghan population were all out to fight on the side of the Turks and the Ameer himself was the only power that prevented that from happening.⁴⁸¹

In his testimony, Duff alluded to the fact that this insecurity was linked to a greater concern about British rule in India. He agreed that the Indian Government was 'an alien Government', sustained by divisions between the different races of India.⁴⁸² He stated that the British 'hold the country on sufferance. If the different races could combine that would be the end of English rule'.⁴⁸³ The real worry, as far as Duff was concerned, was the threat posed by India's 'Mohammedan' population, as this exchange during his testimony illustrates:

Q. The difficulty since there has been a Mohammedan revival is that if you were defeated you might have very serious internal disturbances from the Mohammedan population of India?

A. Yes, that is a population of over 60,000,000.

Q. Is not that danger ever present in the minds of all Indian administrators, both military and civil?

A. Always.⁴⁸⁴

Preventing invasion through India's North West frontier was, for Duff, the 'first responsibility' of the Government of India throughout the Mesopotamian campaign.⁴⁸⁵ This, Duff maintained, was to be achieved, to a large degree, by preserving British prestige in the East.⁴⁸⁶ Any defeats in Mesopotamia were perceived to impact directly upon the Muslim population in India itself.

The Government of India's fears about India's internal stability were greatly increased because of their worries about the loyalty of the Muslim soldiers in the Indian army. Having sent their best troops to fight on the Western Front, the

⁴⁸⁰ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/3, p. 692.

⁴⁸¹ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/3, p. 692.

⁴⁸² Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/3, p. 694.

⁴⁸³ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/3, p. 694.

⁴⁸⁴ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/3, p.694.

⁴⁸⁵ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/3, p.694.

⁴⁸⁶ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/3, p. 694.

Government of India found that it had to defend India against a Muslim uprising and fight a war in Muslim territory, against Muslim troops, with men they simply did not trust to be loyal. In his evidence, Duff told the Commissioners that in the event of a serious defeat on India's North West frontier, he 'should be sorry' to have to rely on the troops at his disposal to remain loyal to the British.⁴⁸⁷ He stated that 'a serious defeat would create a great difficulty throughout India.'⁴⁸⁸ Indian Army officials perceived themselves to be doubly disadvantaged: they could not reinforce IEF D with Muslim troops, and they felt that all available Hindu soldiers were needed to defend India. However, they could not afford to allow Indian Expeditionary Force D to be defeated in Mesopotamia, as they believed that such a loss of prestige would itself have threatened India's security.

In a telegram to Lord Crewe, then Secretary of State for India, Hardinge reminded him of the complexities of sending troops to Mesopotamia:

Mussulman troops are in the main averse from fighting Turks and cannot be sent freely to Barrett [then Commander in Chief of forces in Mesopotamia] while we cannot be sure what their attitude would be if called on to fight Mussulmans on the Frontier when a *jihad* was being preached. It is therefore difficult [to send] Hindus of any class. It seems to us that those who are directing the strategy of the Empire should give the situation in Mesopotamia their most careful consideration. A defeat there would be disastrous to our position in Asia and withdrawal from that country, which might be the only alternative would be little better.⁴⁸⁹

Whilst the defence of India was by far the most important thing to be achieved by the preservation of British prestige in the East, the Political Department of the India Office also worried that any defeats suffered by Indian Expeditionary Force D would impact directly upon the relations that Britain could hope to forge with Arabs during, and after, the war.

During the war, Arab support for Ottoman forces, or a call for *jihad* against Allied forces from Mecca, was seen as potentially disastrous for Britain. It was believed that in this eventuality, Muslims in the British Empire would rebel at a time when Britain could ill-afford to protect it by force, and Muslim troops would mutiny. In a minute titled *The Role of India in a Turkish War*, Sir Edmund Barrow argued that:

⁴⁸⁷ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/3, p. 694.

⁴⁸⁸ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/3, p. 694.

⁴⁸⁹ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/4, Volume IV Appendices, *Papers Handed in by General Sir. E. Barrow*, p.19.

All the omens point to war with Turkey, within a few weeks or even days. Such a contingency need not alarm us unless the Turks succeed in drawing the Arabs to their side. In that case they will probably proclaim a *Jehad* and endeavour to raise Afghanistan and the Frontier tribes against us, which might be a serious danger to India and would most certainly add enormously to our difficulties and responsibilities. This shows how important it is to us to avert a Turko-Arab coalition.⁴⁹⁰

Barrow made it clear that although troops could be landed in the Persian Gulf, 'ostensibly to protect the oil installation', their real task would be 'to notify the Turks that we meant business and to the Arabs that we were ready to support them'.⁴⁹¹ For Barrow, such a demonstration of Britain's military prowess would ensure the support of the Arabs. He concluded: 'with the Arabs on our side *Jehad* is impossible and the Indian Frontier is safe from attack'.⁴⁹² In his statement to the Mesopotamia Commission, Lord Crewe wrote that:

It was clear that our failure to assist the Potentates I have mentioned [Shaikhs of Bahrain, Kuwait and Mohammerah] and the other lesser Chiefs in that area might ignite a fire which would spread over the whole of the Arabian Peninsula, which might, perhaps, involve Mecca itself, and by setting Islam against us as a whole would in turn blaze into Persia and Afghanistan, with the final probability of exciting a Mohammedan rising in India.⁴⁹³

Hirtzel also made the link between prestige, Britain's relations with the Arabs, and India clear in his statement to the Mesopotamia Commission. He explained that had Indian Expeditionary Force D not been dispatched to the Persian Gulf,

Not only would British prestige have suffered irretrievably, while the Gulf itself would have been a serious embarrassment to the Government of India, but the declaration of *Jehad* would hardly have failed – as in the event it did fail – to bring all Islam into the field from Egypt to the North-Western frontier of India.⁴⁹⁴

⁴⁹⁰ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/4, Volume IV Appendices, *Papers Handed in by General Sir. E. Barrow*, p. 1.

⁴⁹¹ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/4, Volume IV Appendices, *Papers Handed in by General Sir. E. Barrow*, p. 2.

⁴⁹² Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/4, Volume IV Appendices, *Papers Handed in by General Sir. E. Barrow*, p. 2.

⁴⁹³ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/2, *Memorandum of the Mesopotamia Expedition from October 1914 to June 1915 by the Marquis of Crewe, K.G. P.*, p. 134.

⁴⁹⁴ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/2, p. 78.

Prestige was seen as an important tool to be used by British officials in their dealings with the Arabs. Britain had informal relations with many shaikhs in the region, 'the object of which [was] to make recourse to force unnecessary'.⁴⁹⁵ Any defeats in the Middle East were visible to, and believed to be influential upon, those whom the India Office wanted most to manipulate with prestige: the shaikhs, the Persians and the Sharif of Mecca, whose support for the Allies the British were trying to secure in this period. Hirtzel was unequivocal that British prestige in the East was central to Britain's dealings with Arab leaders. He asserted that, as the advance to Baghdad was being contemplated, British prestige stood lower than it had done for fifty years, and reminded the Commission that 'our whole position was based on nothing more tangible than prestige'.⁴⁹⁶

From the first landing of troops in the Middle East, therefore, the Political Department of the India Office was keen that the commander in charge, then Field Marshall Sir Arthur Arnold Barrett, should be reminded of the 'necessity of conciliating Arabs in every possible way. Basra if possible, should be treated as a friendly and not an enemy town, and every effort made to restore confidence'.⁴⁹⁷ Before forces had even been dispatched to the Gulf, Lord Crewe, then Secretary of State for India, and Lord Hardinge made it clear that their primary concern was for the protection of British prestige in the eyes of the Arab world. Crewe wrote in a letter to Hardinge at the beginning of October 1914 that 'of the various objects to be attained by sending a force up the Gulf [he has] always regarded the moral effect on the Arab Chiefs as the primary, and the protection of the oil stores as the secondary'.⁴⁹⁸ Hardinge stated that his main concern was that if the oil installation at Abadan was left unguarded, it would lead to a loss prestige; he wrote to Crewe: 'we have to remember loss of prestige with the Arabs, whom we wish to encourage, if it is destroyed'.⁴⁹⁹

As British and Indian forces worked their way north in Mesopotamia, the justification for each successive escalation in operations was that to remain inactive would be perceived as weakness by the Arabs. Hardinge commented that the

⁴⁹⁵ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/2, p.78.

⁴⁹⁶ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/2, p.80.

⁴⁹⁷ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/4, Volume IV Appendices, *Papers Handed in by General Sir. E. Barrow*, p. 7.

⁴⁹⁸ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/2, p. 135.

⁴⁹⁹ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/4, Volume IV Appendices, *Papers Handed in by General Sir. E. Barrow*, p. 7.

destruction of the oil pipeline at Abadan ‘materially [...] would do us no harm, but if we took no action our prestige in the Gulf would vanish’.⁵⁰⁰ Edmund Barrow’s report to the Commission stated that as the advance to Baghdad was being contemplated, ‘the question of how the turn of events on the Tigris would affect the Arab mind was also one which caused serious anxiety’.⁵⁰¹ It was important, therefore, to protect British prestige in the East to secure the support of the Arabs for the Allies during the war. In a telegram that Duff would later tell the Commissioners altered the Government of India’s entire attitude towards the advance to Baghdad,⁵⁰² Austen Chamberlain made clear the importance of securing the support of the Arabs during the war:

At present moment it seems that German attempt to break through to Constantinople will succeed, and our position and prospects in Gallipoli are most uncertain. Persia seems drifting into war on German side whilst Arabs are wavering, and unless we can offer them great inducement will probably join Turks. We are therefore in great need of striking success in the East both to check Persian movement and to win Arabs.

It is suggested that we should occupy Baghdad, giving assurances to Arab leaders that we favour creation of Arab state independent of Turks, and that we shall be prepared to consider future disposition of Baghdad in connection therewith.⁵⁰³

Britain’s shaken prestige was perceived by the men in charge of the campaign to have a direct consequence upon the allegiance of the Arabs. For British officials in charge of the campaign in Mesopotamia, prestige was the most important tool for negotiating the continued neutrality or, better still, the overt support of Arab leaders for the Allies. In an effort to secure this support, a disastrous advance on Baghdad was ordered by Asquith’s cabinet, and supported by the Government of India.

Gallipoli

Prestige was understood as an appearance of superiority that was ultimately based on military power; it allayed the need for a large military presence,

⁵⁰⁰ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/4, Volume IV Appendices, *Papers Handed in by General Sir. E. Barrow*, p. 4.

⁵⁰¹ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/4, Volume IV Appendices, *Papers Handed in by General Sir. E. Barrow*, pp. 45-6.

⁵⁰² Duff tells the Commissioners: ‘From the moment this telegram was received, our whole attitude in India towards the advance changed – my own did certainly.’ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/3, p. 683.

⁵⁰³ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/4, p. 38

but it did so based on a reputation of British strength, prosperity and the intimation that this show of power and control was underpinned by Britain's overwhelming military force. It could not function, therefore, if the military power that produced the awe and respect evoked by prestige was proved ineffectual. It was for this reason that the men who ran the Mesopotamian campaign believed so firmly that it was crucial that British and Dominion forces were not defeated in eastern theatres of war. The Gallipoli campaign, therefore, had an enormous impact upon those who conducted Britain's affairs in the east. It seems clear that, although it was not the main consideration in the decision to order the advance, the prospect of the failure of British forces at Gallipoli was an important factor in the authorisation of Townshend's attempt to take Baghdad. It is undoubtedly true that such a victory would also have been a welcome relief from the bloody stagnation on the Western Front, but it was Gallipoli that most concerned the men debating the authorisation of Townshend's advance in 1915.

Amid vehement criticism from the press and in parliament that 'political considerations' had been allowed to override sound military judgement, almost all the witnesses who gave evidence to the Mesopotamia Commission asserted that in no way was the advance to Baghdad designed to offset losses at Gallipoli. However, this was simply not the case. Chamberlain told the Commissioners that where the Mesopotamia campaign was concerned, the political and the military were inherently conflated:

This is one of the military problems where you cannot dissociate military and political questions. When I speak of political, I mean the state of Persia, and when I speak of the state of Persia, I mean the whole question of the defence of the North-West frontier, and the dangers which existed there.⁵⁰⁴

As Chamberlain's statement suggests, political considerations were important to the Mesopotamian campaign, but not simply, as the press alleged, because politicians were worried about their own careers. Whilst the influence of domestic politics cannot be ruled out, the evidence that came before the Commission suggests that for those in charge of the campaign in Mesopotamia, the failure of the operations in the Dardanelles was important because of its political impact on British prestige in the East, rather than because of the impact of the defeats on domestic politics.

⁵⁰⁴ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/3, p. 809.

Lord Crewe agreed with the Commissioners that 'political considerations seem to have crept in. Persia was in a disturbed state, Gallipoli had been a failure, and it was present [...] in the minds of the political officers that, if possible, we ought to attempt some coup'.⁵⁰⁵ For him, the advance to Baghdad was ordered because of 'the advantage in Persia, the advantage in Arabia, and the general gain of prestige which would be set off against the disaster in the Dardanelles'. He concluded that after the failure at Gallipoli, 'there was a feeling [...] that it was necessary to assert ourselves, somewhere'.⁵⁰⁶ In his oral testimony, Sir Edmund Barrow argued that it was not to make up for failure at Gallipoli that the advance was ordered, rather it resulted from a fear that if British and Indian forces were contained at Kut, Turkish forces would be free to go into Persia, influence Afghanistan and threaten India.⁵⁰⁷ However, in his statement Barrow explained that:

At the time [the advance to Baghdad was being contemplated] it must be remembered that neither in Persia nor in the Caucasus had the Russian advance commenced, nor had we any reason to suppose that it would be so successful as it has been. These reasons alone, quite apart from the Dardanelles, seemed at the time to justify a counterstroke which the General on the spot assured us was feasible.⁵⁰⁸

Asked the same question, Sir Arthur Hirtzel told the Commission 'that the evacuation of Gallipoli would naturally have a very bad effect and it became the more necessary if possible to do something to counteract it'.⁵⁰⁹ Sir Beauchamp Duff stated that he believed that 'in view of what was happening in the Dardanelles they were very anxious for a striking success in the East'.⁵¹⁰ Hardinge told the Commissioners in his evidence that 'political considerations were entirely in the East, not in the Dardanelles at all'.⁵¹¹ However, in a telegram to the Secretary of State for India, he argued:

In view of the German activities in Persia, increasing pressure on Afghanistan, and the aspect in the Balkans and Dardanelles, we hold that the capture of Baghdad would have such an effect in the Near East, and offers such important political and strategical advantages as to justify movement.⁵¹²

⁵⁰⁵ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/2, p. 138.

⁵⁰⁶ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/3, p. 143.

⁵⁰⁷ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/2, p. 30.

⁵⁰⁸ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/2, p. 6.

⁵⁰⁹ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/2, p. 83.

⁵¹⁰ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/3, p. 701.

⁵¹¹ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/3, p. 776.

⁵¹² Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/4, p. 33.

Moreover, in his written statement to the Commission he stated:

The value of such a success as the capture of Baghdad would have been inestimable, not only as a set-off against failure in the Dardanelles, but as an asset in maintaining a position of equilibrium in Persia, Afghanistan and India.⁵¹³

He went on to tell the commissioners that 'having private information that the Gallipoli expedition was not going well', and bearing in mind the views of the cabinet upon the 'great political and military advantages of the occupation of Baghdad,' he felt compelled to support the advance to Baghdad.⁵¹⁴

In his oral testimony before the Commission, Chamberlain read from a letter he wrote to Hardinge, as the Baghdad advance was being contemplated by the cabinet:

There is, it would seem, an opportunity within our grasp for a great success such as we have not yet achieved in any quarter, and it is difficult to overrate the political (and military) advantages which would follow from it throughout the Far East [...]. This consideration is rendered even more important by the imminent intervention of Bulgaria in the war, by the renewed attack on Serbia by Austro-German forces, and by the peril in which these developments place our forces in Gallipoli. It is clear that for the time being we can make no advance there. Our troops have I fear suffered much in moral, and there is great sickness among them. Altogether the prospects of that expedition are far from hopeful, and, if the Austro-German attack opens the way for the free passage of supplies to the Turks, their position might become untenable.

All this strengthens the case for taking full advantage of Nixon's victorious campaign by capturing and holding Baghdad.⁵¹⁵ [sic]

In a campaign where British prestige was perceived to be so important, a military failure of British and Dominion forces in the east had a huge impact on those in charge of forces in Mesopotamia. A military failure on the scale of Gallipoli threatened the inherent superiority of British over oriental peoples, which underpinned the concept of prestige and, therefore, the very rationale of British imperialism in the east.

It is clear that prestige was a concept understood as a tool through which the 'Oriental mind' could be moulded to suit the wishes of British politicians and military commanders. However, a working knowledge of prestige and its potential impact on Britain's international relations was not limited to the world of politics. Press coverage of the campaign suggests that prestige was widely understood by the

⁵¹³ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/3, p. 761.

⁵¹⁴ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/3, pp. 761-2.

⁵¹⁵ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, L/MIL/17/15/65/3, p. 809.

British public as the lynchpin that held Britain's empire together. For the newspapers also, the Mesopotamian campaign revolved around the issue of prestige.

The *Nation's* report, for example, echoed the views of the witnesses who came before the Commission. 'The Story of the Baghdad Campaign', published after Townshend's force was besieged at Kut, began by stating that the Mesopotamian campaign:

So far, has been more successful than any purely British campaign in the war. It has taken risks, but none that were critical without the best reason; and its success has done much to re-establish our shaken prestige in the East.⁵¹⁶

Unlike later press criticism of the Asquith government, the *Nation's* report told its readers that the 6th Division's attempt on Baghdad had taken no risks 'without the best reason'. Linking the advance to Baghdad directly to the withdrawal at Gallipoli, it went on to remind them of Townshend's achievements, most important of which had been the fact that the successes of his force had 'done much to re-establish our shaken prestige in the East'. The *Nation's* report placed the Mesopotamian campaign in exactly the same way as the India Office; the campaign's significance was not in the wider world – it would never help Britain to win the war – but it could serve a very important function in the east.

Many other publications reiterated this point. The *Spectator* reported that even if Townshend's force was able to take Baghdad, 'we must not exaggerate the importance of the event. It will help our prestige in the East and depress the Turks, but it will not, of course, do very much to end the war'.⁵¹⁷ Once again, the achievements of British and Indian troops in Mesopotamia were seen to impact primarily on Britain's prestige in the east, but not on the greater war. The tone of the *Spectator's* comments was assured; it was not telling its readers anything that they did not already know. The report suggested that it was obvious that the push for Baghdad would 'help our prestige in the East and depress the Turks, but it will not, *of course*, do very much to end the war'. In the weeks leading up to Townshend's surrender, the press told the British public over and over again how unimportant the outcome of the siege was for Britain's war effort. *The Times* reported that 'GENERAL TOWNSHEND has now been besieged for 68 days. The siege of Kut is relatively of little importance when compared

⁵¹⁶ 'The Story of the Baghdad Campaign', *Nation*, 11 December, 1915. pp. 377-379., p. 378.

⁵¹⁷ 'Topic of the Day', *Spectator*, 27 November 1915, p. 724.

with the big European campaigns. It has some relation to our prestige in the East, but it can scarcely affect the broad course of the war'.⁵¹⁸ From the beginning of the siege of Kut, the achievements of IEF D were assessed in the British media by their potential impact upon Britain's shaken prestige in the East.

Newspapers also made the link between the achievements of Townshend's troops and the security of India. The *Nation's* report concluded:

If we have any regard for our prestige in the East, if we value our Indian Empire and the means to rule it humanely, we cannot allow another Eastern campaign to demonstrate to the world merely that we know how to die or risk death.⁵¹⁹

Such press coverage suggests a popular understanding of prestige that mirrored the words of John Craik and Henry Baird almost a decade earlier. It also echoed the concerns of the politicians of the time perfectly. The *Nation's* report linked the Mesopotamian campaign's achievements directly to the protection of India: 'if we value our Indian Empire and the means to rule it humanely'; just as Baird had reminded his colleagues that prestige was the only way to rule the Sudan 'in a civilised way'. Ruling India 'humanely', or ruling the Sudan 'in a civilised way' were nuanced ways of saying without force. *The Times* commented that Townshend's defeat would not have as disastrous an impact upon India as some might have feared:

It is hardly necessary to say that the capitulation of the garrison of Kut has very limited military importance. The numbers involved are relatively small, and Kut itself is merely a squalid little Arab town [...]. The enemy will doubtless exploit the episode to the utmost, but their efforts are already heavily discounted. In India, for example, the probable fate of Kut has for weeks been understood just as well as in this country. A triumphal march of Turkish forces to the sea might have a disturbing effect upon India, but it is clear that the Turkish army in Mesopotamia is pinned to its present position, and cannot move down the river.⁵²⁰

Like the *Nation*, *The Times* was reassuring its readers that the surrender of the garrison at Kut would not have a destabilising effect on Britain's Indian Empire. It reminded its readers that the public in India were as well prepared for Townshend's surrender as they themselves were, and assured them that the defeat was not serious enough to cause any real damage.

⁵¹⁸ 'The War in East and West', *The Times*, 14 February 1916, p. 9.

⁵¹⁹ 'The Story of the Baghdad Campaign', *Nation*, p. 378.

⁵²⁰ 'The Fall of Kut', *The Times*, 1 May 1916, p. 9.

However, writing in *John Bull*, Hales bemoaned the fate of India after the failures at Gallipoli and Kut. His unreserved criticism of the running of the Mesopotamian campaign, ironically, also echoed the rationale of those who authorised the advance to Baghdad. He too believed that the impact of loss of prestige in ‘the East’ would be felt in India:

Many of the Indian soldiers taken at Kut had fought at Gallipoli – they had seen our defeat there. They will write home to India. Turkey will see that letters reach their destination, and they will tell all India of Gallipoli and Kut. Even now the bazaars will be ringing with it – and God alone knows how far reaching the consequences may be.⁵²¹

Hales’s reference to the impact of Gallipoli on British prestige and Indian security mirrored the concerns of those who authorised the advance to Baghdad. Gallipoli had a significant influence on the way the Mesopotamian campaign was conducted. As Hales’s comment suggests, the failure at Gallipoli was seen as a significant blow to British prestige in the east. Hales’s blunt statements voiced the anxieties implicit in both the news coverage of the siege of Kut, and of the politicians who were in charge of it: at the centre of both was a fear that such a loss of prestige would result in rebellion in India. The fact that prestige was understood in exactly the same terms by the popular media as it was by British statesmen suggests that far from being a tool of statecraft, understood and utilised only by a few men in positions of power, prestige was a concept that was widely understood by the British public and formed an important part of the popular understanding of empire.

Conclusions

Despite the fact that the campaign in the Dardanelles had failed in its objectives, that Townshend and his men had surrendered to Ottoman forces and been taken into captivity – further damaging British prestige, rather than restoring it – none of the scenarios of revolt across the empire that had dogged every phase of the Mesopotamian campaign materialised. Yet the belief of British officials in the importance of ‘British prestige in the East’ remained entirely unshaken.

⁵²¹ A. G. Hales, ‘Townshend Tells the Truth’, *John Bull*, 13 May 1916, p. 6.

Lord Hardinge told the Commissioners that the loss of prestige had not led to rebellion in India 'because [...] people were more or less prepared, and were able to take measures against it. It had been drawn out for so long'.⁵²² He went on to agree with the Commissioners that 'the fighting powers shown by our troops created a very favourable impression'.⁵²³ As a result, his evidence suggested, Britain did not lose as much prestige as British officials had feared. Sir Beauchamp Duff, too, told the Commissioners:

I thought that the fall of Kut would have had a much greater political effect in Afghanistan and amongst the tribes than actually turned out to be the case, and I think that that was due to the fact that our fighting quality was shown to be so high.⁵²⁴

Arthur Hirtzel stressed that disaster in India had only been avoided by the success of the Russian campaign in Persia. He stated:

I saw a note the other day by an officer on the General Staff, which contained this remark: "That for the last year India has been defended by Russia" – and roughly that is true. I took the question more as referring to India than to the borderland of Afghanistan there our prestige has gone down considerably, I think. [...] Prestige in itself is valueless, of course. It is the results which follow from prestige which are valuable, and those results are not unfavourable to us, or are not more unfavourable than they are in Persia at the present moment, because the Russians have made good our defects, and through Persia the influence spreads to Afghanistan and the [Indian] border.⁵²⁵

Chamberlain agreed with the Commissioners' suggestion that the loss of prestige in the eastern theatres did not have the impact he, the cabinet, and the Government of India believed it would have. He too saw the 'Russian advance' as having made good British failures in 'the East'. However, he felt that 'there has been to some extent a mischievous effect upon our prestige as a result of the unsuccessful campaign', and told the Commissioners: 'I should be very sorry if I thought that the campaign would close exactly where we stand now – I mean the Eastern campaign'.⁵²⁶ Chamberlain's comments to the Commission reiterated the fear that existed among those charged with governing India and running the campaign in Mesopotamia. The concept of British

⁵²² Mesopotamia Commission Archive, IOR/L/MIL/17/15/65/2, p. 784.

⁵²³ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, IOR/L/MIL/17/15/65/2, p. 784.

⁵²⁴ Mesopotamia Commission Archive, IOR/L/MIL/17/15/65/2, p. 693.

⁵²⁵ Mesopotamia Commission, IOR/L/MIL/17/15/65/2, p. 87.

⁵²⁶ Mesopotamia Commission, IOR/L/MIL/17/15/65/3, p. 816.

prestige reveals how precariously British officials felt their grip on the empire to be during this period.

Prestige permeated the workings of the Mesopotamia Commission to such an extent that its relative absence in the Commission's findings is conspicuous. David French suggests that the reason the reports of the Mesopotamia and Dardanelles Commissions paid such scant regard to prestige was that the concept was far too important to be dissected publicly. French argues that the commissioners did not explain the role of prestige in British colonial policy because 'if, as the rulers of the empire believed, their rule was based on a political conjuring trick, it was hardly sensible to explain to their audience how it worked'.⁵²⁷ This is certainly true. The Commission's investigations revealed that the emphasis placed on prestige by the British and Indian establishments had been entirely misplaced. The loss of prestige in the east had little or no impact at all; as the commissioners pointed out to witness after witness, India was still safe, and the Arabs still allied themselves with Britain shortly after the surrender of the garrison at Kut.

However, British prestige was much more than just a rationale for managing British colonial relations in the east. To admit that the prestige was flawed was to question the inherent superiority of British over eastern peoples, which was central to the concept. More disconcerting, perhaps, was the fact that to question the power of prestige on the peoples of 'the East' was to undermine Britain's understanding of the 'Oriental mind'. If orientals remained unshaken by the loss of British prestige, then perhaps they could understand more nuanced arguments than simple 'tangible success, which can be measured in square miles and demonstrated on the map'.⁵²⁸

A Note on Baghdad

As discussed in Chapter One, Lord Cromer was seen by his contemporaries as one of the foremost experts on the 'Oriental mind'. Edward Said

⁵²⁷ French, p. 57.

⁵²⁸ Mesopotamia Commission Report, L/MIL/17/15/65/10, Appendices, Appendix VI: *Memorandum by the Political Department of the India Office for the Interdepartmental Committee.*

cites him as one of the archetypal orientalists: a man who defined the oriental from a position of superiority and with a firm belief that he understood the orient better than the orientals themselves could. In his descriptions of the oriental mind, Cromer defined it in opposition to that of the occidental; Said has described the process of creating the orient as one that would necessitate such opposition. In 'The Government of Subject Races', Cromer reflected that 'the gulf which separates any one member of the European family from another' was 'infinitely less wide than that which divides all Westerns from all Orientals'.⁵²⁹

Yet the city of Baghdad was seen as a suitably high profile target for Indian Expeditionary Force D because of its significance for both the Oriental and Occidental imaginations. Baghdad's significance for the British in this period was demonstrated by its prominence in the press coverage of the Mesopotamian campaign. *The Times* reported on 30 September, 1915 that:

Sir John Nixon has the gratification of announcing another brilliant victory by the gallant force which he commands [...]. [We] are now within some ninety miles of Baghdad itself, the famous capital of the Abbasid Caliphs, which even in its decay is a city of no mean importance.⁵³⁰

This article is reminiscent of the comments of travellers to Mesopotamia before the First World War: it described Baghdad with reference to its perceived heyday under the Abbasid caliphate, and remarked that 'even in its decay' it remained a high-profile target for British and Indian troops. The *Illustrated London News* described Baghdad as 'the city of the Arabian Nights'⁵³¹ and as 'ground famous both in history and romance'.⁵³² The *Spectator* reminded its readers that the loss of such a great city 'would be a very serious embarrassment to the Turks, and would greatly increase our prestige in the East'.⁵³³

Baghdad was seen as a victory that had the potential to make right the impact of the failure at Gallipoli on British prestige because of its dual significance for the Western and Eastern imaginations. Lord Crewe told the Commissioners that 'nobody will dispute the reality of those political advantages, or the glamour attaching

⁵²⁹ Cromer, 'The Government of Subject Races', p. 40

⁵³⁰ 'Sir John Nixon's Victory', *The Times*, 30 September 1915, p. 7.

⁵³¹ 'Where British Troops Are Fighting Near the City of the 'Arabian Nights'', *Illustrated London News*, 4 December, 1915, p. 7.

⁵³² 'Where British Troops Are Fighting', *Illustrated London News*.

⁵³³ 'Asquith Speech Breakdown', *Spectator*, 6 November 1915, p. 610.

to the capture of the most famous city, even in the European mind, and still more in the Eastern'.⁵³⁴ Given that a belief in the importance of British prestige was predicated upon the acceptance of the existence of an Oriental mind whose reactions could be anticipated by British officials, the belief that Baghdad was a city of significance 'even in the European, and still more in the Eastern' mind was revealing. Lord Crewe was not suggesting a parity between the two minds: Baghdad held significance '*even* in the European' mind, but far more in the Eastern. Nevertheless, the dual significance of the city illuminates a meeting-ground between Orient and Occident, one that the concept of prestige overshadows in the debates surrounding the advance to Baghdad in 1915.

⁵³⁴ Mesopotamia Commission Report, L/MIL/17/15/65/2, p. 135.

4

The Mesopotamian Campaign 1916-1918

Even in the land that pre-war travellers had perceived as ossified and that servicemen and women continued to identify most strongly with its past, the period after the surrender of the garrison at Kut brought with it the trappings of modernity. In February 1916, day-to-day running of the campaign was transferred to London, and after July 1916, the War Office assumed complete control of the campaign. The handover brought with it financial investment in the hitherto neglected theatre. Technology and resources that would have been unimaginable in November 1914, when soldiers had been expected to fight with guns marked 'for practice only', were finally made available to those serving in Mesopotamia.⁵³⁵ With greater financial investment at his disposal, the General Officer Commanding, Sir Percy Lake, began by reorganising the administration of the campaign. The majority of change in Mesopotamia was, however, effected during General Sir Stanley Maude's command of forces in Mesopotamia between August 1916 and November 1917. The modernisation of Mesopotamia continued under the command of Lieutenant-General William R. Marshall, who took over as Commander in Chief in Mesopotamia after Maude's premature death and presided over the remainder of the campaign.

Under Maude's leadership, British and Dominion forces began the building of railway lines to connect key Mesopotamian towns and cities; such infrastructure, which made the transportation of goods and servicemen much faster and more efficient, had been rejected as too expensive in the early stages of the campaign. During this period, steps were taken that would transform Basra's seaport, Ashar Creek, into a dock for larger ships. This enabled the more effective receipt of supplies and troops. Telegraph lines were extended, concrete roads built to facilitate faster troop movement, and better, more appropriate river transportation was made available to British and Dominion forces in the last two years of the campaign. It was only in 1916 that nurses arrived to care for the many sick and wounded in

⁵³⁵ A. J. Barker, *The Neglected War: Mesopotamia 1914-1918* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), pp. 17-18.

Mesopotamia. In stark contrast to the neglect of wounded servicemen that had led to criticism of the management of the campaign, nurses were now able to care for servicemen and women in modern hospitals. As part of the rapid increase in troop numbers in Mesopotamia came a greater number of RFC planes, and with them increased air reconnaissance and the beginning of the aerial mapping of Mesopotamia. In addition, the latter half of the campaign saw the arrival of motorised vehicles such as Ford Lorries and Rolls Royce armoured cars, which began to take the place of cavalry in the campaign.⁵³⁶

The changes that took place in Mesopotamia in the last two years of the war made significant differences to the ability of military leaders to move troops and, therefore, to run a more efficient and successful campaign. Under the command of Sir Stanley Maude, troops slowly worked their way northwards, retaking the area around Kut al-Amara in the early months of 1917. On 11 March 1917, Maude's troops entered Baghdad. The British press feted the newly-promoted General; *The Times* proudly reflected on 'Sir STANLEY MAUDE'S triumph at Baghdad' for weeks after British forces entered the city.⁵³⁷ Having consolidated the British hold on the city, Maude's forces pushed north, capturing the town of Ramadi in September that year. Under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir William Marshall, British and Indian troops continued to extend the area under British control, reaching the northern city of Kirkuk in May 1917, and occupying the key city of Mosul in northern Mesopotamia in the days after the armistice with Turkey on 31 October 1918. My primary interest is not, however, in the impact of the modernisation of Mesopotamia on the military campaign, but in the way British servicemen and women experienced, and therefore perceived and represented, Mesopotamia and its peoples once these modern conveniences were in place. This chapter will trace the impact of the rapid modernisation of Mesopotamia upon British perceptions of the region and its peoples.

⁵³⁶ Ron Wilcox, *Battles on the Tigris* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 2006), pp. 146-7.

⁵³⁷ 'The Victory in Palestine' in *The Times*, 30 March 1917, p. 7.

New Mythologies

The surrender at Kut had been a humiliating defeat that was perceived as a severe blow to British prestige in the East. In its wake, the War Committee was compelled to alter its policy in regards to the Mesopotamian campaign. British policy in Mesopotamia in the second half of the campaign returned to the cautious approach that had characterised the first months of the war. British and Indian forces were instructed to maintain British influence in the Basra *vilayet*, to protect the oil wells in Persia, and to co-operate with the anticipated Russian advance in Persia. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshall Sir William Robertson, wrote in April 1915 to make it clear to Sir Beauchamp-Duff that 'our policy in Mesopotamia is defensive and we do not attach any importance to the possession of Kut or to the occupation of Baghdad'.⁵³⁸ Robertson conceded, however, that in order 'to counteract the effect of the fall of Kut', it was important to 'maintain as forward a position as can be made secure'.⁵³⁹ Having been severely censured by members of both Houses of Parliament and by the popular press, those in charge of the campaign in Mesopotamia were reluctant to take any further risks in what remained a secondary or subsidiary theatre of the war.

It was with slow, deliberate steps that Maude's troops re-took the town of Kut al-Amara in February 1917. At each stage of what was to become the capture of Baghdad, Maude had to argue the case for pushing north with a reluctant War Office in London. The recapture of the town of Kut was a cause of pride for those serving in Mesopotamia. General, then Lieutenant, Ainsworth told his interviewer that it had been 'a great joy to all of us later when ultimately we got the Turks cleared out of Kut. It took us the better part of 12 months'.⁵⁴⁰ On passing the town in 1917, Captain Allan Byrom, a Glaswegian medical student before the war who was initially posted to Mesopotamia from March 1917 as a captain in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, noted that 'it was very inspiring to see the Union Jack flying above General Head

⁵³⁸ F.J. Moberly, *The Campaign in Mesopotamia, 1914-1918*, History of the Great War Based on Official Documents, 4 vols (London: H.M.S.O, 1923-27), (vol.3, p.3).

⁵³⁹ Moberly, vol. 3, p. 3

⁵⁴⁰ T.B. Ainsworth, IWM Sound Archive, London. Accession No: 4001. (Hereafter Ainsworth)

Quarters. As it flaunted in the early morning breeze it seemed to give out a note of defiance to all those who would attempt to haul it down.⁵⁴¹

Despite their dismissal of Kut al-Amara as an insignificant loss after Townshend's surrender, the British papers celebrated the cautious and well-planned way in which General Maude's forces re-took the town in 1917. *The Times* proclaimed that Maude's 'long series of judicious and methodical operations' had 'avenged General Townshend'.⁵⁴² The re-capture of Kut earned Maude a promotion, and made him a hero in Britain. An editorial in *The Times* announced that Maude had turned the 'tide of misfortune' and 'avenged' those who had surrendered at Kut.⁵⁴³ In a leader marking the recapture of the town, the paper made it clear that the consequences of the siege of Kut would continue to define the Mesopotamian campaign:

We have long ceased to regard the operations in Mesopotamia with enthusiasm, because we hold that the earlier phases were misguided, and also because the demand they made upon our shipping and other resources is probably disproportionate to their value. There never was a time when it was more important for the Allies to concentrate their energies upon the main fighting fronts. But we recognized and appreciate the reasons which have doubtless led the Government to persist in their resolute determination to turn the Turks out of Kut. British prestige was involved, and it was probably imperative not to leave the enemy in undisturbed possession of a strategic position which our own forces had held so long and so valiantly. In the face of many difficulties, SIR STANLEY MAUDE and his indomitable troops have steadily and methodically fought their way along the right bank of the Tigris.⁵⁴⁴

Though many changes were being made in Mesopotamia itself, *The Times'* coverage of the campaign remained constant. Mesopotamia was still regarded as a secondary theatre of war, and maintaining British prestige remained the primary motivation for keeping troops there at all. Finally, Townshend's attempt on Baghdad, which had defined the campaign in Britain hitherto, was to remain at the heart of press coverage. At each stage, the achievements of British commanders in Mesopotamia were contextualised with reference to Townshend's surrender at Kut. In this way, the story of Townshend and Kut remained at the heart of representations of Mesopotamia in the British press.

⁵⁴¹ Private Papers of J. A. Byrom, IWM Docs. London. Catalogue number: 8503 99/84/1. (Hereafter Byrom)

⁵⁴² 'The Victory of Kut – A Well-Planned Scheme', *The Times*, 27 February 1917, p. 5.

⁵⁴³ 'Kut and Ancre', *The Times*, 27 February 1917, p. 7.

⁵⁴⁴ 'Kut and Ancre', *The Times*.

In addition to defining the campaign in Britain, Townshend's attempt on Baghdad in November 1915 redefined those parts of Mesopotamia associated with the story into landmarks, or memorials, to the role he and his men had played in the campaign and the hardships they had suffered. The town of Kut al-Amara became synonymous with the suffering of Townshend's troops. Gordon Bennett volunteered to work as a chaplain with the YMCA in Mesopotamia at the end of 1916. His diary, which he sent in instalments to his wife in India, contains a song composed by, and popular with, the troops: 'Messy-pot-amia – Delirium in Many Verses'. The song went through each letter of the alphabet from 'A is the apple that some people say/ Used to exist down Kurnah way' to Z. For those serving in Mesopotamia K was simply:

For Kut where Townshend's brave band,
For many long months made their glorious stand,
It had to give in, though relief was at hand,
But he's honoured in Mesopotamia.⁵⁴⁵

The myth surrounding Townshend at Kut was added to the many other mythologies with which Mesopotamia was identified by British troops. As British servicemen and women made their way north, they commented on specific landmarks in predictable ways. Basra was invariably described as a disappointing "Venice of the East" on account of the number of creeks which lead from the Shat 'l Arab to the native town some two miles away'.⁵⁴⁶ Qurna was almost always described as the 'traditional site of the Garden of Eden'.⁵⁴⁷ In letters home to his mother and sister, Captain Baxter noted that so often did servicemen remark on the Garden of Eden or the blue dome of Ezra's tomb that to do so was a cliché. (He, nevertheless, described it in this way in separate letters to his mother and sister, and sent home a drawing of the tomb!).⁵⁴⁸ Captain Baxter served with the 6th Battalion South Lancashire Regiment (38th Brigade, 13th Division) from April 1916 until the end of the war. After the siege of Kut, Kut al-Amara and other parts of Mesopotamia associated with Townshend's advance or with attempts to relieve the garrison were added to the list of comment-worthy attractions. Bennett wrote of his visit to 'the famous Diyailah Mound and

⁵⁴⁵ Cited in Private Papers of Rev. J G. Bennett, Imperial War Museum Documents, London. Catalogue Number: 7064 97/33/1. (Hereafter Bennett), pp.40-43.

⁵⁴⁶ Joseph T. Parfit, *Serbia to Kut: An Account of the War in the Bible Lands* (London: Hunter & Longhurst, 1917), pp. 38-9.

⁵⁴⁷ Parfit, p. 40.

⁵⁴⁸ Private Papers of C. W. Baxter, IWM Documents, London. Catalogue Number: 1026 Con Shelf, p. 303. (Hereafter Baxter).

Redoubt' that it had 'been the scene of the most dramatic attempt – and failure – to relieve Kut, in March last year, where so many of the Manchesters and others, were laid low.'⁵⁴⁹ In his diary for April 1917, Brigadier E. M. Ransford noted the sights as he and his colleagues travelled north:

At intervals the horizon was relieved by mounds, occasional villages and objects of archaeological interest – Ezra's Tomb on the bank of the Tigris – Ctesiphon with its great arch – Kut-el-Amara where Townshend and his troops were besieged in a loop of the river.⁵⁵⁰

Kut had gone from a little-known town along the Tigris, noted only for the fact that it had a liquorice factory, to a well-known landmark along the route to Baghdad. Here, Ransford listed Kut among the sights of interest that broke up what he and many of his colleagues regarded as an otherwise monotonous Mesopotamian landscape.

When he visited Kut al-Amara in November 1917, Captain Byrom was excited at the prospect of staying in the house where General Townshend had stayed during the siege of Kut. It served, by that time, as the lodgings of the political officer, and Byrom 'looked forward to staying for a day or perhaps two in a house which was closely connected with the famous siege'.⁵⁵¹ Reflecting on her time in Mesopotamia, Eleanor Shortt told her interviewer that it had been 'exciting going to Kut, after all the siege and everything'.⁵⁵² As Reginald Campbell Thompson, still serving in the Political Service in Mesopotamia, was to note in his memoirs, the siege of Kut had made the town of Kut al-Amara famous.⁵⁵³ The buildings of the town, which had been dismissed by servicemen and the British press as a 'squalid Arab town', had now become sights in their own right.⁵⁵⁴

Before Townshend's attempt on Baghdad, the Arch of Ctesiphon had most commonly been associated with the emperor Julian the Apostate. Having defeated Persian forces in 363 C.E. but unable to lay siege to Ctesiphon, Julian turned his forces towards the Jebel Hamrin region of Mesopotamia, where his men were

⁵⁴⁹ Bennett, p. 77.

⁵⁵⁰ Private Papers of E. M. Ransford, IWM Documents Archive, London. Catalogue Number: 4801 80/29/1, p. 13. (Hereafter: Ransford).

⁵⁵¹ Byrom, p. 60.

⁵⁵² Eleanor Morrison Shortt, IWM Sound Archives, London. Accession Number: 8296. (Hereafter: Shortt).

⁵⁵³ R. Campbell Thompson, *With the Intelligence to Baghdad* By R. Campbell Thompson Sometime Captain, *SSO GHQ Intelligence IEFD*, 'The First World War Memoir of Captain R.C. Thompson'. I.W.M. Docs., London. Catalogue number: PP/MCR/424, Microfilm. (Hereafter Thompson), p. 61.

⁵⁵⁴ 'The Fall of Kut', *The Times*, 1 May 1916, p. 9.

defeated and he died from a spear wound.⁵⁵⁵ After the battle of Ctesiphon and subsequent siege at Kut, the arch took on a new significance for those who served in Mesopotamia. As this extract from Richard Pope-Hennessy's diary illustrates, the arch of Ctesiphon became a memorial to those who had given their lives in the battles leading up to the siege of Kut:

At four o' clock this afternoon away on the distant horizon there loomed up out of the dust the arch of Ctesiphon; it stands well up above the dreary desolate plain of Mesopotamia, sole remaining fragment of a great edifice raised to his own glory by one of Alexander's generals, and for many years to come a memorial to the dead of the 43rd. Indeed most of our officers, and God knows how many of our men are buried within a stone's throw of the arch. The Seleucidae have passed away – they have no further use for pillars; as that is so, perhaps the stout Macedonian who had the pillars built will not grudge the time-worn remnant as a memorial to soldiers as stout as any his master led; something to tell the men of another age [...]. Here [...] fought and died and conquered against great odds a regiment as brave and as well disciplined as any Macedonian phalanx. I believe the arches have echoed to the tread of the legions; Persian, Parthian, and Arab armies have in their turn passed it spreading desolation and here the Turk learnt that a superiority of three to one is not enough when fighting us. It is one of the blood-stained monuments of the world. Even in the far distance, shrouded in a grey veil of dust, I could not look at it unmoved.⁵⁵⁶

Pope-Hennessy's description of Ctesiphon is far more detailed than that given by most servicemen. It is not, however, historically accurate. His allusion to Alexander's general refers presumably to the building of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris, a large Seleucid city founded by Antiochus I in 274 BC. Antiochus was the son and heir of Seleucus I, one of the Generals who divided Alexander's empire after his death.⁵⁵⁷ Seleucia stood opposite Parthian Ctesiphon, which was founded between 160 and 140 BC by Mithridates I.⁵⁵⁸ It was the Sassanian King Sapor, or Shapur, (AD 241-271) who first built a palace at Ctesiphon.⁵⁵⁹ Ctesiphon was, however, sacked by several Roman or Byzantine armies, and it was another Persian King, Chosroes, or Khosrow, I (AD 531-579) who in the sixth century AD made peace with the Romans, and made Ctesiphon his winter capital. He rebuilt Shapur's palace, and added the arch, the remains of

⁵⁵⁵ David S. Potter, *The Roman Empire At Bay: 180-395* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 517-18.

⁵⁵⁶ Private Papers of L. H. R. Pope-Hennessy C.B., D.S.O., I.W.M. Docs., London. Catalogue number: 12641 03/35/1, 2 September 1916, p. 108. (Hereafter, Pope-Hennessy), p. 217-8.

⁵⁵⁷ Georges Roux, *Ancient Iraq* (London: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 378.

⁵⁵⁸ Roux, p. 382.

⁵⁵⁹ Roux, p. 384.

which Pope-Hennessy could see in 1917.⁵⁶⁰ The Arabs conquered Ctesiphon in 637 AD, and the city was soon superseded by Abbasid Baghdad.

The inaccuracies of Pope-Hennessy's description are significant not because they are historically inaccurate, but because of what they reveal about his perceptions of Mesopotamia's history and culture. Pope-Hennessy attributed the grandeur he saw before him to a Western or Hellenistic figure – one of Alexander the Great's generals. The civilizations that really did leave the palace at Ctesiphon as their legacy are a mere footnote in Pope-Hennessy's description. They are listed quickly, almost as an afterthought. Pope-Hennessy noted that the Sassanians had 'passed [the Arch of Ctesiphon] spreading desolation'. But it had been the Roman armies who sacked Shapur's Ctesiphon, 'spreading desolation', and another Persian leader, not a 'stout Macedonian', who had rebuilt it.

Pope-Hennessy's description focused on two western armies. He was clearly very proud of the actions of the British men who had fought at Ctesiphon, subscribing to the theory that Townshend's men had beaten the Turkish force despite a huge disparity in numbers, but that Townshend had, nevertheless, had to retreat because of a shortage of water and the high numbers of wounded men. According to some accounts, Julian defeated Persian forces at Ctesiphon, but turned away from the city, to the bewilderment of his officers.⁵⁶¹ The two stories were merged, and the Arch seemed, therefore, all the more appropriate as a monument to Townshend's men. Pope-Hennessy's emphasis on Alexander's armies can be read as a reflection of his desire to honour the British men who had given their lives around the site of the Arch by comparing them to some of the famous – and successful – armies of antiquity. Nevertheless, it is the armies of a western or Hellenistic figure that define the Arch in his description, eclipsing the more significant role that was played by other civilizations in Mesopotamia's history.

Pope-Hennessy's description of Ctesiphon illustrates the way it was transformed into a monument to the British troops who had given their lives there, under General Townshend's command.⁵⁶² He seamlessly merged what he believed to be the ancient history of the Arch of Ctesiphon with this modern significance. In a

⁵⁶⁰ The remains of the palace were destroyed by floods in 1987; only the Arch now remains.

⁵⁶¹ Gavin Young, *Iraq: Land of Two Rivers* (London: Collins, 1980), p. 77.

⁵⁶² Pope-Hennessy's admiration did not extend to the Indian troops, as will be discussed later.

precursor of the memorialisation that would characterise the post-war era, he could see the Arch only as a monument to the men who had died there and, consequently, 'could not look at it unmoved'. The battlefields of Europe were soon to become tourist attractions. In these descriptions, we can see the transition of parts of Mesopotamia from unmapped wildernesses to battlefields, and finally, as Pope-Hennessy's description indicates, to attractions or memorials to the dead of the British and Indian Armies.

Progress

As discussed, many of those who were sent to Mesopotamia had reservations about the value of the campaign. Their doubts quickly turned to animosity as they confronted Mesopotamia's harsh climate, unfavourable geography, and the hardships inflicted upon them by the mismanagement and lack of funding that plagued the early stages of the campaign. In contrast, those who served in these latter stages of the Mesopotamian campaign were met by a buzzing hub of efficiently planned activity and much greater care for their personal needs and entertainment. Those who had not served in Mesopotamia during the early phases of the campaign could not perceive this as a great improvement, but they could see the Mesopotamian skyline changing before their eyes, and noted such changes with great pride. Allan Byrom reflected upon the changes made in Basra with imperial pride. 'From a sleepy seaport town ruled by Turkish misgovernment, oppression and stick-in-the-mud principles', he boasted, 'Basra had been turned into a hive of industry under the guiding hand of the proud people who rule beneath the Union Jack'.⁵⁶³ Byrom concluded that 'it is only on seeing things like this that one can appreciate to the full extent what a wonderful little nation we really are'.⁵⁶⁴

British servicemen often remarked on the stark differences between the simple (often mud) buildings of Mesopotamia and those introduced by British and Indian forces. Because the latter were often larger than the buildings around them, the changes made by British and Indian forces quickly came to dominate the skyline in the

⁵⁶³ Byrom, p. 20

⁵⁶⁴ Byrom, p. 20

towns where they were introduced. Thus, Captain McKeag, who arrived in Mesopotamia in March 1917 with the 1st/6th Ghurkhas (Abbottabad Brigade), noted that in Ashar Creek, 'the principal building is the telegraph office, which is of only one storey, but as [it] is built of brick it looks quite distinguished amongst the surrounding mud houses'.⁵⁶⁵ Second Lieutenant Harold Hussey arrived in Mesopotamia in December 1916. He served first with 3rd Battalion Devonshire Regiment, and in February 1917 was attached to the 1st Battalion Manchester Regiment (Jullundur Brigade, 3rd Lahore Division). He was killed in an advance with the Manchesters, in March 1917. In letters home, Hussey described the Mesopotamian landscape. 'On the left bank', he told his family, 'there is literally nothing. i.e. there is no camp, trees, civilized habitation (there are probably a few Arab villages dotted about) – only just open desert, stretching away in the distance as far as the mountains'.⁵⁶⁶ Disregarding Arab villages as a form of 'civilized habitation', Hussey went on to describe the only feature of the Mesopotamian landscape to strike him as significant: 'beyond, the desert as on the other bank, [...] a line of telegraph wires stretching accross [sic] apparently to infinity'.⁵⁶⁷ Hussey's description of Mesopotamia's landscape paints a picture of an empty land, marked only by the presence of endless telegraph wires stretching as far as the eye could see. The wires that defined the Mesopotamian landscape in Hussey's description had literally marked those areas under British control with a visible sign of continued British power. But, in their prevalence in these servicemen's letters and memoirs, these newly constructed landmarks are also a reflection of shifting British perceptions of Mesopotamia. Its landscape was no longer dominated by landmarks that reflected Mesopotamia's mythological or historical significance; instead, modern practicalities and wartime events were beginning to dominate descriptions of Mesopotamia in this period.

Captain McKeag visited the city of Baghdad twice during his stay, both times travelling at least part of the way on the newly-constructed railways. Though he was not impressed by the speed with which he reached the city, such convenience

⁵⁶⁵ Private Papers of H. T. A. McKeag, IWM Docs. London. Catalogue Number: 1872 86/2/1, p. 30. (Hereafter McKeag).

⁵⁶⁶ Private Papers of H. E. Hussey, IWM Docs. London. Catalogue Number: 6347 97/4/1, p. 38. (Hereafter Hussey).

⁵⁶⁷ Hussey, p. 38.

would have been unheard of in the early years of the war. During his second trip to 'the city of the caliphs' in April 1917, McKeag reflected:⁵⁶⁸

Really we run Baghdad very well, and it must be no light matter. Both the military and civil police are models of smartness, and, I believe, efficiency. The latter are imported from Egypt. Sanitation, compared with what it must have been, is admirable. Roads are steadily improving, and this is not a country in which road material is easily found. There are fixed rates for the hire of bellums [boats used by locals] on the river, while steamers run up and down between the city and various camps near, at fixed hours. Even the bazaar urchins have been numbered and registered as messenger-boys, and are a great convenience, since not only are vehicles few, but far the most convenient, almost the only way to "do" the bazaar is on foot, and one cannot carry one's purchases about oneself. [...] Five years of British rule would make Baghdad an extremely prosperous city.⁵⁶⁹

Like Byrom, McKeag was extremely proud of the change brought about in Mesopotamia under British rule. He stressed the enormity of the task of ruling Baghdad, reminding his family that the efficiency achieved was 'no light matter' and underlining the scarcity of resources: both the manpower for the civil police force and material for the new roads were imported. What McKeag admired was the quantification inherent in the British rule of the city and the resultant de-mystification. His description stressed that each formerly unknown variable had become clearly numbered, ordered and administered by British powers: 'even the street urchins have been numbered and registered as messenger-boys'. McKeag was not simply rejoicing in the efficient running of the city, or in its modernisation, but in the standardisation and quantification of its unknowns.

By the time Pope-Hennessy arrived in Baghdad in May 1918, he could write with delight of the improvements the British had made to the city's skyline:

The brown Tigris flows past them in great swirling eddies. The only alteration to the landscape is the solitary addition the British have made to the architecture of Baghdad. It is not a minaret – though not unlike one at first sight – for it is that typically western feature, a chimney- the chimney of the electric powerhouse which now lights us and turns invigorating fans in our rooms and offices. Blessed be electricity!⁵⁷⁰

Pope-Hennessy's description of the addition of the chimney of an electricity plant is indicative of the mixed reactions to the trappings of modern life in a land

⁵⁶⁸ McKeag, p. 57.

⁵⁶⁹ McKeag, p. 68.

⁵⁷⁰ Pope-Hennessy, p. 308.

predominantly understood before the war to have been frozen at an early stage in its development. Electricity dramatically improved the quality of life for servicemen and women serving in Mesopotamia's climate by bringing them modern luxuries such as electric lighting and fans. In an acknowledgment of a typical description of a city identified with the *Arabian Nights* stories in Britain, Pope-Hennessy likened the chimney to a minaret: the paradigmatic emblem of an eastern or oriental city. But, as he stressed, the focus of his description was in fact a western feature. It was to the practicality of these changes that Pope-Hennessy's remarks attended: 'fans in our rooms and offices'. Electricity, one of the quintessential elements of modern life in the west, dominated his description of a city that only a few years earlier had been associated with fable and antiquity.

However, not all British servicemen rejoiced in the 'blessings' brought about by changes made by British and Indian forces. Like the men and women who described Mesopotamia before the war, McKeag saw the real city of Baghdad as a disappointment. Yet his nostalgia was not simply for the grandeur of Abbasid Baghdad, but for a Baghdad untainted by the modernisation that had been wrought by British occupation:

Baghdad is not by any means the magnificent city that its history, or rather its renown, would lead one to expect. There are no very famous palaces and very few fine mosques; nor are there any noted ruins, though indeed ruins in the East, except probably the work of the ancient Persians at Persepolis and Ctesiphon, are not of any great attractiveness. Buildings are for the most part graceful rather than grand and lose their beauty when they fall into dis-repair. Yet seen from the river in its proper setting of sunlight the City of the Caliphs has a great deal of charm and strangeness, especially now, when the trees are green, giving a contrast with the toned yellow of old brick. But alas! Even since I was here before a tall iron chimney has been introduced to interfere with the harmony of the place, and before long there are bound to be many such jarring notes.⁵⁷¹

The beginning of Captain McKeag's account is reminiscent of the descriptions of Baghdad given by pre-war travellers to Mesopotamia: he saw it as a disappointment, a city fallen from the heights it had reached at earlier points in its history. Like pre-war accounts, McKeag's description of the city also identified Baghdad's heyday in its ancient history, seeing everything since the Caliphate as a downward slide into disrepair.

⁵⁷¹ McKeag, p. 67.

However, McKeag's description contains a different kind of nostalgia, described by Renato Resaldo as 'a particular kind of nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed'.⁵⁷² McKeag was disappointed by the fact that 'a tall iron chimney has been introduced', which, for him, disrupted 'the harmony of the place'. He was saddened by the possibility of further modernisation, regretting the probability that 'before long there are bound to be many such jarring notes', despite the fact that these changes were brought about by the actions of his own colleagues, in the service of his country. Finally, McKeag found the modernisation of Baghdad 'jarring' because modern substances, such as iron, seemed to him to have no place in 'the East'. In another diary entry, McKeag noted that Baghdad's bazaar was once:

Reputed to be the finest in the East, but the old buildings have completely disappeared, and even the modern ones are in bad repair, a good deal of the vaulting having been replaced by that most obtrusive evidence of Westernization in the East – galvanized iron.⁵⁷³

For McKeag, galvanized iron was an ugly, physical manifestation of the worst kind of western influence on the east. In an echo of the nostalgia expressed by him in regards to Baghdad's skyline, the introduction of iron into Baghdad's architecture was the last chapter in a story of decline. His nostalgia for Baghdad's former grandeur echoed that of pre-war travellers, but in his lament of the modernisation of Baghdad as a result of British intervention, McKeag was expressing very different sentiments from those voiced by pre-war travellers, who had longed for the modernisation of Mesopotamia by means of British intervention.

Most British servicemen enjoyed the benefits that modernisation brought into their lives. Indeed, McKeag himself wrote that he was considering Baghdad as a possible place for settlement after the war because of its excellent rail links with the rest of Asia and the Middle East.⁵⁷⁴ It is clear that those who came to Mesopotamia after the fall of Kut had a far more pleasant experience. They were, on the whole, well fed, well looked after when they became ill or were injured, and stationed in barracks that, in comparison to the accommodations in the early stages of the campaign, were luxurious. Gordon Bennett's letters were filled with the

⁵⁷² Renato Rosaldo, 'Imperialist Nostalgia', in *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 68-87 (p. 69).

⁵⁷³ McKeag, pp. 67-8.

⁵⁷⁴ McKeag, p. 67.

entertainment he and his colleagues at the YMCA organised for the troops: nightly films screened in their own cinema, and games of football and rugby.⁵⁷⁵

Reginald Campbell Thompson recalled that by the time British forces occupied Baghdad, 'the staff had [...] plenty of motor cars, and there were even motor-launches; and we were housed in palaces with gardens, and courtyards, bananas and theatrical flowers'.⁵⁷⁶ He noted that he had been stationed in 'an enormous room panelled with pieces of looking glass, and a magnificent red carpet, a curious rococo place'.⁵⁷⁷ Entertainment was plentiful; Thompson recalled the occasional 'Concert Party [...] and even a pantomime, most ambitiously conceived and executed' where 'the appropriate story Sinbad was performed'.⁵⁷⁸ Even amidst a quickly changing skyline, the *Arabian Nights* stories continued to seem an apt choice for the city of Harun al-Rashid. Reginald Campbell Thomson stressed that such entertainment was a welcome relief from the 'interminable work', but this comfortable lifestyle was a far cry from the early stages of the campaign.⁵⁷⁹

Those who had served in Mesopotamia from the early stages of the campaign noted the changes made to Basra and the surrounding areas in particular. Thompson wrote that upon his return to southern Mesopotamia in March 1918, 'Basrah had become an unknown quantity to [him]'.⁵⁸⁰ He described how the city 'now spread literally for miles over the country, and included was a broad tarmac road'.⁵⁸¹ Even Thompson had become accustomed to certain modern conveniences; he did not find it noteworthy that he was able to quickly source the goods he needed from Basra, and to board 'the train [...] off to Nasiriyah'.⁵⁸² Both would have been unimaginable luxuries two years earlier.

Servicemen wrote particularly highly of the services available in and around the town of Amara. Allan Byrom visited the town in November 1917; he recalled that he was 'able to go out a little and so take still more enjoyment in life

⁵⁷⁵ Private Papers of Rev. J G. Bennett, Imperial War Museum, London. Department of Documents: 7064 97/33/1

⁵⁷⁶ Thompson, p. 107.

⁵⁷⁷ Thompson, p. 108.

⁵⁷⁸ Thompson, p. 108.

⁵⁷⁹ Thompson, p. 108.

⁵⁸⁰ Thompson, p. 164.

⁵⁸¹ Thompson, p. 164.

⁵⁸² Thompson, p. 164.

generally and in the pleasures of Amara and its surroundings in particular'.⁵⁸³ It was practically unheard of for a serviceman to note the 'pleasures' of any part of Mesopotamia in the early part of the campaign. Byrom's description of the entertainment on offer not only demonstrates the stark difference from the sheer misery reported by servicemen early in the war, but the extent to which the town had changed:

These [pleasures] included short trips up river in a motor boat and occasional visits to the cinema, without which no town, either East or West, is complete. The motor trips were most enjoyable and gave me an opportunity of viewing more closely some of the scenery I admired so much when coming down stream on the river boat, while the pictures brought me once again into touch with the Western World. The films were quite up to date and vastly superior to the last I had seen in Baghdad. The famous Charlie Chaplin was to the fore, and although he may seem funny to those at home, he is ten times funnier when seen on the screen in a place like Amara. The Arabs were greatly excited and showed their delight in no unmistakeable manner.⁵⁸⁴

Byrom was clearly happy in Mesopotamia. The climate, the people, the flies and the diseases that afflicted him were entirely unaltered, but he was clearly enjoying himself. Byrom stressed the modernity of his experiences in Mesopotamia: he explored the landscape in a 'motorboat', not a 'native' craft, and not only did he go to the cinema, but he stressed that the films themselves were 'quite up to date'. His insistence that the films available were the latest releases highlights the high standard of living enjoyed by those serving in Mesopotamia in this period. Byrom may have found Chaplin's films all the more entertaining in Mesopotamia because they were a welcome relief from the hardships of war, though one would not have guessed it from the remainder of his description. What struck him was the incongruity between Chaplin's groundbreaking films and their existence in a place traditionally located in historical and mythological discourses in the British imagination. The linguistic barrier between Byrom and the 'Arabs' rendered them silent in his description, like the films he described. Byrom stressed that the Arabs 'were greatly excited and showed their delight in no unmistakeable manner'. No doubt, the arrival of the cinema – a modern luxury by any standards in 1917 – in Mesopotamia was a cause of excitement among the local population as well as the troops. Their physical, rather than linguistic, expression of delight evokes an image of the peoples of Mesopotamia as 'primitive',

⁵⁸³ Byrom, p. 35.

⁵⁸⁴ Byrom, p. 35.

living in a pre-linguistic stage of their evolution. This comment, therefore, draws the reader's attention once more to the novelty, and peculiarity, of a cinema in Mesopotamia, and sets its modernity – stressed in Byrom's description – in opposition to the 'primitivism' of the peoples, in Byrom's account.

By the time Byrom visited Ashar Creek in southern Mesopotamia in October 1918, he could dine at 'the club', choose between two cinema theatres and even take in a game of golf:

The Strand Cinema is an open-air show, but at the Splendid Palace one could witness a really good performance, including the very latest Charlie Chaplin film, from a plush-covered box seat, while appropriate music was dispensed by a string orchestra, which unfortunately, like the person's egg, was only good in parts. In the Club practically the only permanent members were the British civil residents in Basra, but officers could by paying Rs. 6/8 obtain a 'chit' book of Rs. 5 value. Fairly good meals and drinks could be had at fabulous prices.⁵⁸⁵

So settled does the British community in Ashar Creek sound, that Byrom might have been describing a peace-time British colony anywhere in the world. Once more, Byrom stressed that he could watch 'the very latest Charlie Chaplin film'. His detailed account paints a picture of southern Mesopotamia on the eve of the Turkish surrender as a transformed place. He recalled well-established British firms such as 'Gray Mackenzie & Co., Strick, Scott & Co., Andrew Weir & Son, and Hills Bros', which had situated their headquarters in the 'European quarter' of Ashar.⁵⁸⁶ Byrom described the transformation of Ashar with great pride, noting that:

Going across Ashar Creek from the Strand via Whitley Bridge, one comes straight into Bridge Street, which owing to the innovation of British ideas and handiwork became quite a respectable thoroughfare, with British, Indian and Native shops, at which one could buy useful things without being altogether robbed. There were also several small restaurants run by Locals for the use of the troops.⁵⁸⁷

Here, despite the ongoing war, a community of British people had access to all the conveniences they could want; businesses flourished, and place names were anglicised or entirely replaced with English names. British firms were trading successfully, and shops and restaurants run by the native population had begun to cater for the British

⁵⁸⁵ Byrom, p. 67.

⁵⁸⁶ Byrom, p. 66.

⁵⁸⁷ Byrom, pp. 66-7.

market. Allan Byrom even became a freemason: a member of 'the Lodge Mesopotamia'.⁵⁸⁸

Adventures in the East

In his article 'War, Memory, and the Modern: Pilgrimage and Tourism to the Western Front', Modris Eksteins argues that the lure of seeing the world was a motivating factor for many men who volunteered to fight in the early months of the First World War.⁵⁸⁹ Eksteins claims that the attraction of travel was used to recruit men from around the empire. He cites recruiting posters which 'offered "a free world tour to Great Britain and Europe: the chance of a lifetime"', in order to entice young Australians to join the armed forces.⁵⁹⁰ Although very few British servicemen expressed a desire to serve in Mesopotamia for these reasons, some British servicewomen did see nursing in Mesopotamia as their chance for an interlude of liberty, fun and travel before settling down to the responsibilities of married life.

Eunice Winifred Lemere-Goff served in 'Mesopot', as she called it, as a nurse with Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service. In an interview conducted many years after the war for the Imperial War Museum, she described how she and her sister had volunteered for service in Mesopotamia because 'we wanted more experience, we wanted to see another country, we wanted [...] to meet other people, to see the Arabs [...] that was the idea: of seeing another country'.⁵⁹¹ Lemere-Goff had only good things to say about Mesopotamia; her recollections were of a land that was 'very primitive, but [...] very enjoyable'.⁵⁹² She remembered travelling to Mesopotamia on 'a lovely big ship', and of serving in Basra in 'very big hospitals, it wasn't one hospital there were about half a dozen hospitals'.⁵⁹³ Her impressions of the

⁵⁸⁸ Byrom, p. 44.

⁵⁸⁹ Modris Eksteins, 'War, Memory and the Modern: Pilgrimage and Tourism to the Western Front' in *World War One and the Cultures of Modernity*, ed. by Douglas Mackaman and Michael Mays (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2000), pp. 151-160.

⁵⁹⁰ Eksteins, p. 152.

⁵⁹¹ Eunice Winifred Lemere-Goff, IWM Sound Archive, London. Accession Number: 9523. (Hereafter Lemere-Goff).

⁵⁹² Lemere-Goff.

⁵⁹³ Lemere-Goff.

Arabs of Mesopotamia were equally favourable. She described leisurely expeditions into nearby towns:

When you had your time off, to cross over into the town you had to go in what you called a *bellum* [...], but Arabs used to paddle you along, Arabs, young Arabs. And they were charming people. Some could talk your language, some couldn't. Then I started learning a bit of their language [...] so that I could discuss things with them, you know. [...] We'd go shopping and have donkey picnics, met some lovely young officers out there.⁵⁹⁴

Crucially, women like Lemere-Goff had volunteered; they had chosen to contribute to the war effort, and where they wished to serve. This element of choice may well have contributed to the overwhelmingly positive memories expressed here, which stand in stark contrast to the majority of reactions to Mesopotamia expressed by her male colleagues, even in these latter stages of the campaign. The description above would be difficult to identify as a wartime scene; it reads like the travels of a young woman to a foreign country at any time. Like any sensitive traveller, Lemere-Goff attempted to grasp the basics of the local language, and seemed to have enjoyed the outings she described and her interactions with the local population. Asked directly what her experiences of Mesopotamia's peoples had been like, she recalled that the Arabs 'were very friendly; very, very nice'.⁵⁹⁵ She recalled that she and her sister had travelled unescorted on a train to Baghdad with only one 'young white man – that was all – the rest were all Arabs [...] right out in the desert. But we were safe as houses, we didn't mind'.⁵⁹⁶

Eleanor Shortt was also a nurse with Queen Alexandra's Imperial Nursing Service. She served in Gallipoli, Mesopotamia, and later in Persia. Reflecting on her time in Mesopotamia in an interview conducted nearly seventy years on, she told her interviewer that she 'volunteered for "Mespot"[...]; some people were coming back with horrible tales, I said "well never mind, I'll try it." [Laughs].'⁵⁹⁷ Her recollections of Mesopotamia were much like those of Eunice Lemere-Goff. She volunteered for service in Mesopotamia because she 'thought it sounded exciting and rather interesting'.⁵⁹⁸ Asked specifically why she had wanted to go to 'Mespot', Shortt reasserted the fact that she had simply been curious: 'Just to see what it's like.

⁵⁹⁴ Lemere-Goff.

⁵⁹⁵ Lemere-Goff.

⁵⁹⁶ Lemere-Goff.

⁵⁹⁷ Eleanor Morrison Shortt, IWM Sound Archive, London. Accession Number: 8296. (Hereafter Shortt).

⁵⁹⁸ Shortt.

Thought the desert would be rather good'.⁵⁹⁹ Her reasons for wanting to serve in Mesopotamia were remarkably similar to those given by pre-war travellers to Mesopotamia, who had also been fascinated with the prospect of an unmapped land, with vast deserts. Like Lemere-Goff, Shortt stressed that she had 'had a marvellous time [...], thrilled to bits to be seeing something new'.⁶⁰⁰ Asked what her reaction had been to the announcement that the war was over, she told her interviewer that though she had been 'glad the war was over', she had also regretted the end of an exciting episode of her life. Her reaction to the announcement of the armistice was "'Oh dear, it's a little bit dull'".⁶⁰¹ She saw her time in Mesopotamia as an adventure, made firm friends with whom she kept in touch after the war, and was sad to see an exciting period of her life come to an end.

Although women like Gertrude Bell and Louisa Jebb did travel to Mesopotamia in the early twentieth century, such travel was not yet widely available – indeed, this was part of the attraction of Mesopotamia. Moreover, few would have had the means to finance such trips at this time. For women like Eunice Lemere-Goff or Eleanor Shortt, the war was an opportunity for travel and adventure in places they might never otherwise have been able to see. Although as nurses they were reminded daily of the human cost of the war (Lemere-Goff worked predominantly in surgical theatres), it is clear from their enthusiastic and happy recollections of their time in Mesopotamia that, for them, it was also an adventure, and the opportunity of a lifetime. Despite the fact that she had had to be carried into Basra on a stretcher suffering from heat exhaustion, Shortt had no hesitation in affirming that she had 'enjoyed every minute of it' – a response one would be hard-pressed to find from many men who served in Mesopotamia, even in the latter half of the campaign.⁶⁰²

It must also be acknowledged that the retrospective nature of these sources may have coloured the women's recollections. Mary Ann Brown's diary, by contrast, gives a much less favourable impression of her time in Mesopotamia. Brown also served as a nurse in Mesopotamia; she arrived in December 1916, and her diary stopped when she became ill in January 1918. In many ways, Brown's diary indicates that she shared the attitudes of her male colleagues in Mesopotamia. In particular,

⁵⁹⁹ Shortt.

⁶⁰⁰ Shortt.

⁶⁰¹ Shortt.

⁶⁰² Shortt.

unlike Lemere-Goff, she was extremely fearful, and had an intense dislike of the 'natives' or 'Arabs' of Mesopotamia. In a continuation of earlier attitudes towards Mesopotamia's peoples, Brown's diary is littered with references to the dangerousness, treachery and thieving of Arabs. Upon her arrival she noted:

The Persians and Arabs on the opposite side [of the river] are not too friendly: the English sentries get shot occasionally. [...]

Our huts are guarded by an armed sentry all night; it makes one feel safe when you go to bed knowing there is a man with a fixed bayonet outside your door.⁶⁰³

As is suggested by her conflation of 'Persians and Arabs', like many of her male colleagues serving in Mesopotamia, Brown knew very little about Mesopotamia or its peoples. Like servicemen in the early part of the campaign, Brown noted the Arab sniping at British and Indian forces. The fact that a sentry was posted outside her lodgings suggests that she and her colleagues were fearful for their safety. Brown was grateful for the protection afforded by the sentry, and often noted her fears for her personal safety in her diary. In an entry dated 20 January 1917, she recorded a break-in at the canteen: 'some Arabs thieving again'.⁶⁰⁴ This undermined her feeling of security inside the camp; 'strange the sentrys [sic] didn't see them,' She reflected: 'two Indian guards walk about all night and one stands at [the] officers entrance.'⁶⁰⁵ Finally, Brown concluded:

I will need to carry around the carving knife with me, I certainly wouldn't like to disturb them at their thieving, it's a wonder I didn't, because I passed by the canteen four times last night; they must have shaded their light well, if I see any suspicious creatures about I will first call the guard and clear out, in case a stray shot comes my way.⁶⁰⁶

She became convinced that the country was populated by dangerous, unscrupulous people. No longer sure of the security of the military camp, Brown reflected in her diary her uncertainty about how she could ensure her own safety. Arming herself with a knife might make her feel safer, but she did not like the idea of using one. In the end, she resolved to 'call the guard and clear out'. Perhaps because of these early

⁶⁰³ Private Papers of M A Brown, I.W.M. Docs. Catalogue Number: 1001 88/7/1, 2 January 1917. (Hereafter Brown).

⁶⁰⁴ Brown, 20 January 1917.

⁶⁰⁵ Brown, 20 January 1917.

⁶⁰⁶ Brown, 20 January 1917.

impressions of Mesopotamia, Brown did not note any positive interaction with Mesopotamia's peoples. She cited several examples of what she described as 'Arab treachery',⁶⁰⁷ and believed that they were 'treacherous bruits a brut thug don't know any better'[sic].⁶⁰⁸

On a trip to Baghdad in November 1917, Brown described 'the country getting more and more wild', and remarked that 'the natives run along the banks in their birthday suits, they are quite savage and would murder you for the clothes you wear'.⁶⁰⁹ These sentiments were typical of attitudes towards Mesopotamia's peoples throughout the campaign. Brown's comments were a mixture of fear that she would be harmed and a reflection of her acceptance of the racial stereotypes of this period. As a result, she did not see the people running along the river bank without clothes as poor, but as 'quite savage'. It was not only Mesopotamia's landscape that she was describing as 'more and more wild', but implicitly, its peoples too.

Nevertheless, Mary Ann Brown shared some of the views expressed by Shortt and Lemere-Goff. She too found Mesopotamia exciting. Despite complaints about the people, flies and weather, she noted that 'it is all very interesting here, always something going on'.⁶¹⁰ Later, as some of the men she treated were sent to India or back home, she noted: 'they are so glad to get away from this country and cannot understand when I say I don't want to go back yet'.⁶¹¹ Women volunteered for service in Mesopotamia despite its reputation as dangerous and difficult, because it afforded them opportunities for travel and experiences, which they might not otherwise have had. It is possible that the passage of time helped to fade the discomforts, unmentioned in Shortt and Lemere-Goff's accounts but so prominent in Brown's. That she too should have enjoyed her time in Mesopotamia enough to want to stay when others looked forward to their return to Britain suggests that young women perceived their time in Mesopotamia very differently from their male colleagues. For young women from backgrounds not as privileged, or as encouraging of independent travel, as those of Gertrude Bell or Louisa Jebb, the First World War

⁶⁰⁷ Brown, 21 January 1917.

⁶⁰⁸ Brown, 27 February 1917.

⁶⁰⁹ Brown, 23 November 1917.

⁶¹⁰ Brown, 3 January 1917.

⁶¹¹ Brown, 3 March 1917.

offered not just an opportunity to serve one's country, but also an unparalleled opportunity for independence and travel.

Although such sentiments were rarely expressed by men serving in Mesopotamia at any stage of the campaign, the ways in which servicemen related their experiences of Mesopotamia were reminiscent of pre-war travelogues. The slower pace of the campaign during the last two years of the war gave servicemen far more free time, and the availability of conveniences made their lives easier and more comfortable. This gave their accounts of service in Mesopotamia the characteristics of travel narratives. In his letters home, Richard Pope-Hennessy regularly described outings that could, were it not for the wartime settings, be mistaken for travellers' tales. He described one reconnaissance mission in May 1917, during which he 'explored the wonderful old castle of el Ajik, a Mesopotamian edition of a robber baron's castle on the Rhine; an impressive wreck of great age'.⁶¹²

It was not simply the sightseeing that rendered Pope-Hennessy's descriptions reminiscent of travel narratives, but the way he regularly took photographs and collected aide-memoires and souvenirs. On this occasion, he wrote to his wife that he had 'picked up some fragments of pottery for [her] and took some photographs'.⁶¹³ On several occasions, Pope-Hennessy wrote home that he had 'picked up a few pieces of pottery to remind [him] of one of the most tragic places in this most tragic land',⁶¹⁴ or that he had 'posted [their son] John a fur cap with a red top such as is worn by a Turkish lieutenant-colonel'.⁶¹⁵ These comments suggest a touristic experience of Mesopotamia, in which one collected souvenirs, took photographs and sent home gifts – exactly as one might do on holiday.

Other servicemen's diaries also give the impression that while Mesopotamia continued to be a war-zone, those who served there during this period related their experiences in such a way as to suggest that they were travellers, not servicemen. Upon arrival in Baghdad, Captain Byrom expressed his delight at having reached 'Baghdad, the city of Arabian Nights, and the principal town of Turkey in Asia', and remarked that the following day he 'sallied forth to see the sights!'.⁶¹⁶ In his diary

⁶¹² Pope-Hennessy, p. 236.

⁶¹³ Pope-Hennessy, p. 236.

⁶¹⁴ Pope-Hennessy, p. 238.

⁶¹⁵ Pope-Hennessy, p. 264.

⁶¹⁶ Byrom, p. 22.

entry for the 12 March 1917, Rev. Bennett wrote home with pride that he could ‘only say Baghdad is in our hands’.⁶¹⁷ He went on to reflect: ‘whatever there may be in the nature of souvenirs [...] I imagine the troops will not be allowed in the city at all until everything has been policed and reorganized after the looting by the Turks, Arabs and Kurds’.⁶¹⁸ In a letter home, Captain Baxter wrote that he hoped that ‘people at home are keeping all my letters. They will, I hope form for my souvenirs of the great war [sic]’. He went on to add that, unlike other servicemen, he had ‘never troubled to collect shrapnel and shell cases etc. they are far too common and photographs are so much trouble, besides being strictly forbidden on active service’.⁶¹⁹ Baxter’s comments indicate that British servicemen and women were marking not only their time in Mesopotamia specifically, but their service in ‘the great war’ more generally.

Susan Stewart has argued that travel writing, and especially the collection of souvenirs, can be seen as inherently nostalgic modes of marking experiences. She notes in particular that:

The exotic souvenir is a sign of survival – not of its own survival, but the survival of the possessor outside his or her own context of familiarity. Its otherness speaks to the possessor’s capacity for otherness: it is the possessor, not the souvenir, which is ultimately the curiosity.⁶²⁰

Stewart’s analysis of the function of the souvenir seems an apt way to view the collection of souvenirs by servicemen and women in Mesopotamia. In a wartime setting, her observation that the souvenir marks the collector’s ‘survival’ outside his or her normal experience is doubly significant: the souvenirs described above literally mark the survival of these men, as well as their ability to survive outside their ‘own context of familiarity’ in the sense Stewart describes. Stewart’s acknowledgement of the transformative impact of ‘exotic’ or ‘other’ experiences also seems a fitting way to view the collection of souvenirs in this context. As discussed, the alterity of servicemen’s experiences was a marked reaction to their service in Mesopotamia; particularly in the early phases of the war, they felt their experiences to be incomprehensible to those outside Mesopotamia.

⁶¹⁷ Bennett, p. 92.

⁶¹⁸ Bennett, p. 92.

⁶¹⁹ Baxter, p. 303.

⁶²⁰ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, The Gigantic, The Souvenir, The Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 148.

De-mystifying the land of the *Arabian Nights*

Even in these later stages, servicemen frequently remarked on their alienation from Mesopotamia; they could neither understand nor describe the land and its peoples to their loved ones back in Britain. Second Lieutenant Harold Hussey remarked on several occasions that Mesopotamia and its peoples were so unfamiliar that he lacked the vocabulary to describe them to his family. He wrote home in January 1917 that though he knew that his family would have liked to ‘hear something of [his] first impressions,’ they were ‘not easy to convey’.⁶²¹ He later expounded on the difficulty he had in describing, or relating to, Mesopotamia and its peoples:

This is a very strange country, and difficult to describe, as I have never seen anything approaching it before. It seems unreal somehow: as if I shall soon wake up and find myself in my ample bed at Sheldon.⁶²²

Comments such as these suggest that Hussey found it difficult to relate to Mesopotamia in any way. He described it as a dream-like state, in which he could not quite believe his eyes, expecting at any minute to awake and find himself in the familiar surroundings of his home in England. Captain Baxter also felt that there was something indescribable about the Mesopotamian landscape and climate. He wrote home that he found it:

Absolutely impossible when describing anything, to give you the idea of sunshine. [...] When you look at a photograph of anything happening out here, you never imagine enough sunshine to go with it. So I want you always to imagine a cloudless sky, a windless day and over everything bright glaring sunshine and no dull colours.⁶²³

Like the pre-war travellers, servicemen and women continued to associate Mesopotamia with biblical stories and the *Arabian Nights*; these rendered the land, which many perceived as alien or indescribable, familiar. ‘It seems funny at first to hear people talking familiarly about these old familiar places’, Captain Baxter wrote home to his family.⁶²⁴ ‘Someone giving direction as to the way: “You keep to the

⁶²¹ Hussey, p. 32.

⁶²² Hussey, p. 32.

⁶²³ Baxter, p. 306.

⁶²⁴ Baxter, p. 323.

left of Gomorrah and go straight on till you come to Lot's mound.”⁶²⁵ Although there was a dispute amongst those serving in Mesopotamia as to whether Sodom and Gomorrah were, in fact, located in Mesopotamia, the re-naming of places in Mesopotamia after familiar biblical sites helped British servicemen and women to feel more at home there. Like pre-war travellers, those who served in Mesopotamia in the latter half of the campaign likened the country and its peoples to pictures from the Bible, or figures and scenes from the *Arabian Nights* stories.

Like many of his colleagues who pronounced themselves unable to describe or relate to] the country they were serving in, Hussey resorted to these familiar stereotypes from his childhood to understand and describe Mesopotamia:

The houses are all extremely like biblical pictures – as are the Arabs. They are dressed awfully like the illustrations in, for instance, the illustrated New Testament in my room. I must here state that it is absolutely impossible to describe one tenth of the daily scenes here: everything is so unlike anything I have ever seen. For instance, apart from the Army and YMCA, I have only seen one European, and I am writing about two days after we landed.⁶²⁶

Although Hussey still found Mesopotamia strange, only ‘one tenth of the daily scenes’ remained impossible to convey. Moreover, he had identified what exactly it was that he found so alienating about the country: there were very few Europeans. Despite the fact that he pronounced Mesopotamia indescribable, he had many familiar cultural references to draw upon. For Harold Hussey, and for many others, the alien peoples of Mesopotamia were most easily understood if likened to familiar figures from the Bible.

Rev. Gordon Bennett also wrote home to his wife in India that the Arabs he encountered were ‘dressed like the old pictures of Abraham’ and ‘look all the worst you hear of them’.⁶²⁷ Later he noted that ‘the Arabs here or in Basra verify the accuracy of the best Bible picture’.⁶²⁸ Here, Bennett was confirming both pre-war stereotypes of Arabs as figures from the Old Testament, and wartime stereotypes of Arabs as cut-throats and thieves. McKeag’s response to the peoples of Mesopotamia also drew on familiar images. He wrote home that the people of Basra were ‘simply an un-idealised version of the Arabs of pictures’.⁶²⁹ His description of the Arabs of Basra was not dissimilar to that given by Harold Hussey; McKeag too was drawing on familiar

⁶²⁵ Baxter, p. 323.

⁶²⁶ Hussey, p. 34.

⁶²⁷ Bennett, p. 22.

⁶²⁸ Bennett, p. 48.

⁶²⁹ McKeag, p. 31.

imagery to describe an unfamiliar scene. Like pre-war travellers, McKeag saw the actual Mesopotamians as a disappointment, because they did not live up to the expectations engendered by his preconceptions.

This period of the Mesopotamian campaign was one of transition in which the old, familiar imagery of oriental or biblical stories sat uncomfortably with the changes being wrought by modern warfare. Upon his arrival in Baghdad, Rev. Bennett reflected on this uncomfortable mingling of the eastern and the western, or modern. He described the house in which he and his colleagues were lodging in the following terms:

Through to its courtyard stand four vast chatties (big enough for concealing four at least of Ali Baba's forty thieves) through which the chlorinated waters of the Tigris drip, innocuous, if not entirely crystal clear, into the vessels below. This back courtyard opens out upon a wondrous grove where one can wander about half a mile amongst rose blossoms and rhododendrons, orange and pomegranate, vine and fig trees, with date palms rising gracefully above them everywhere. It is a perfect oriental fairyland, but alas there are no fruits to be plucked from off them now (perhaps this is the reason why the Arab husbandmen have so little objection to our strolling therein) and the nearest suggestion to a Ginn arising in trailing wreaths of smoke, is in sober truth the work of the useful if hardly ornamental incinerator we have had to install in one corner. By the time the second crop of fruit is ripening, I imagine the owners will of course receive fair market value. Meanwhile, the latter are happy to accept packets of the ubiquitous Woodbine as our offering in return for bunches of beautiful roses, and to attend with their delighted children (though, being Moslems, of course, not their wives as well) at our evening cinema and other entertainments.⁶³⁰

In this description, the already old-fashioned references to the *Arabian Nights* sit alongside the modern conveniences of the British army. Urns that could have held Ali Baba's thieves now hold the 'chlorinated waters of the Tigris', made safe for servicemen to drink. Bennett's 'perfect Oriental fairyland' is filled with the plants of the East, but not with its spirits. The smoke in the corner, Bennett regretfully informed his wife, is not 'a Ginn arising in trailing wreaths of smoke', but 'the useful if hardly ornamental incinerator we have had to install in one corner'. Finally, his interaction with the Arabs could not be further from a scene from the *Arabian Nights*. No longer characters from biblical stories, these men are compensated for their flowers with Woodbines and entertained by the modern cinema.

⁶³⁰ Bennett, p. 106.

Photography played an important role in the de-mystification of Mesopotamia in the last two years of the war. Though Baxter wrote that the taking of photographs on active duty was forbidden, servicemen were otherwise encouraged to take photographs of their time in Mesopotamia. These photographs can also be read as souvenirs, in Susan Stewart's terms. Photography supplies were easily obtainable, and photographs could either be developed by servicemen and women themselves, with the prints shown to the censor for approval, or simply given to the official photographer, who would print and censor the photographs. Aerial photography transformed the way British commanders conducted the campaign in Mesopotamia. Moberly writes that as early as late 1916:

The British air force was very active [...] reconnaissance, photography and co-operation with our artillery were all developed to a high degree of efficiency. Reconnaissance and photographic work were specially important, as accurate survey maps of the country bordering the Tigris beyond our front did not exist; and, to remedy this, large areas were photographed mile by mile and, from these photographs, maps were compiled.⁶³¹

RFC planes were able to produce accurate images of the Mesopotamian landscape and of Ottoman troop movements. These transformed attitudes of commanders towards the land: no longer plagued by mirage or the inability to predict Mesopotamia's landscape, they were able to accurately gauge what they were to come up against. In much the same way as McKeag was able to rejoice in the quantification of each disparate element of Baghdadi life, so the aerial photography of Mesopotamia enabled British commanders in the field to eliminate the unknown elements that had drawn pre-war travellers such as Gertrude Bell. The desert was no longer an uncharted wilderness; Mesopotamia's 'Oriental backwardness' was being modernised and brought under British control.

Race

In the second half of the campaign, the simplified, stereotypical understanding of race that had characterised British descriptions of Mesopotamians and Indians in the first two years of the war was complicated by a number of factors.

⁶³¹ Moberly, Vol. 3, p. 56.

As troop numbers in Mesopotamia were increased, men from Britain who had never served in the Indian Army or lived in India were sent to serve in Mesopotamia. Men like Harold Hussey interacted with people from other cultures for the first time during their service in Mesopotamia. Hussey was shocked to find that he was surrounded by faces that were not white. He wrote home that there were 'a lot of Indian troops on board, who wear miscellaneous strange and scanty costumes'. His early impressions were favourable; he noted that 'some of the native officers are very fine looking me, with profuse rich beards'.⁶³² His naive comments reflect the extent of his ignorance regarding the country in which he was being sent to serve. He wrote home with surprise that there were Indian troops 'everywhere':⁶³³

There are far more Indians than British in this part of the world. Although some of them are excellent fighters they are treated very much like children. You constantly see a full grown m[a]n – most men wear beards – sobbing like a child. And they understand corporal punishment far better than anything else, I believe.⁶³⁴

Hussey saw the Indians under his command as infantile. Although he acknowledged that some were effective combatants, even 'excellent fighters' were treated 'like children'. His belief that Indian troops responded better to corporal punishment reflected his understanding of them as simple and child-like people who, therefore, could not be reasoned with. The vision he presented of the lives of these men is very affecting. One wonders what treatment or circumstances had moved so many Indian servicemen to tears, such that this was Hussey's predominant impression of Indian troops.

Richard Pope-Hennessy's views on race were an especially complex mixture. He espoused particularly strong views on his Indian troops. He believed that the Indian soldiers under his command were inferior to his white troops, writing on one occasion that 'the Indian regiments did not do badly that day, far from it, but they simply could not have done the anything without the British regiments'.⁶³⁵ He objected to press coverage in Britain, which emphasised the important role being played by Indian soldiers in Mesopotamia, noting that it was 'rather sickening to see uninstructed opinion in England given to understand that the job was done by

⁶³² Hussey, p. 33.

⁶³³ Hussey, p. 39.

⁶³⁴ Hussey, p. 39.

⁶³⁵ Pope-Hennessy, p. 184.

natives'.⁶³⁶ However, even before he had arrived in Mesopotamia, Pope-Hennessy took time to outline his views on India and all its inhabitants:

I loathe the Indian as much as the Anglo Indian. I love the African native as much as I loathe the native of India; he is at the same time more of a man and more of a child – these people are too much slave and too much devil, full of old, age-old devilry.⁶³⁷

In these reflections, his complex and contradictory view of the races he had encountered is made clear. He despised India's inhabitants, often complaining about Indian inefficiency and the luxury in which he found wartime British communities in India. His comments indicate that he saw African 'natives' as simpler: 'more of child'. He respected the fact that these peoples did not try to imitate the ways of white men; this is what made them 'more of a man', in his eyes – despite his understanding of them as primitive. On the other hand, though they might have been considered more 'advanced', Pope-Hennessy believed the people of India to be duplicitous; they behaved like 'slave[s]', but were always scheming: full of 'age-old- devilry'. Though he subverted some of the conclusions drawn from discourses of race in this period, they formed the basis of his analysis of, and interaction with, people of other cultures.

Captain Baxter expressed similarly multifarious sentiments about the Arabs (Mesopotamian and Egyptian) he encountered in Mesopotamia. He wrote home that:

The Arabs here are a vastly superior type to the Egyptian Arabs. I don't think I have even seen such a degraded type of humanity as the lowest classes of the Egyptians. They are little better than beasts, if at all. I suppose they have been spoilt by civilisation. Anyway the ones here, who have kept their independence, are superior in every respect.⁶³⁸

These comments draw heavily on contemporary theories of race; Baxter saw the Egyptians as being in a primitive stage of their evolution – 'little better than beasts'. Baxter disliked the servility of the Egyptians, and although he did not much like the Arabs of Mesopotamia, he respected the fact that they had 'kept their independence'. His observation that the Egyptians had been 'spoilt by civilisation' is ambiguous. It can be read as a comment upon British rule in Egypt, but also as a reference to the ancient civilizations of Egypt. The Egyptians he encountered had either been spoilt by having

⁶³⁶ Pope-Hennessy, p. 184.

⁶³⁷ Pope-Hennessy, p. 115.

⁶³⁸ Baxter, p. 283.

had to accommodate British power, or by their distance from the achievements of their forefathers. In either case, the distance between these Egyptians and civilization is highlighted in Baxter's account.

It is clear that, like Pope-Hennessy, Baxter did not particularly like his Indian colleagues. He described Muslim soldiers at prayer one evening:

It is rather nice now sitting out. The sun has gone down and it is getting rather dark. In the west a long row of camels in single file, are crossing the remains of the sunset, looking quite black against the glow. I love the way they sway their necks protestingly with every one of their slow unwilling steps. Here and there an Indian crouches on the ground and bumps his forehead on the ground, facing Mecca in the South West. Or else he stands and chants the monstrous verses of the Koran. He keeps it up for about half an hour.⁶³⁹

The beginning of his description is of an idyllic, and stereotypical, scene from 'the East'. While the image of camels moving across the desert at sunset was described in careful detail and filled with affection, his description of the Indian soldiers at prayer is comparatively aloof. The camels seem to glide across the image he created, but the Indian soldiers 'bump' their heads jarringly on the ground and chant 'the monstrous verses of the Koran'. He showed a relatively detailed understanding of the Muslim religion, citing the direction of prayer and the holy book, but the experience was an alienating one for him. Though the Muslim prayer was just as much a quintessential part of life in Mesopotamia as the camels, the prayer interrupted Baxter's serenity and comfort.

As Mary Ann Brown's diary indicated, many of the stereotypes of Arabs as treacherous, dishonourable, lazy people continued to be prevalent during this period. The 'Arabs' were still seen as a plague upon British and Indian troops, and their image as merciless bands preying upon the vulnerable was only enhanced by stories of Arab maltreatment of British soldiers after the surrender of the garrison at Kut al-Amara. Margery Thomas joined the army in 1916 and served as a nurse in Mesopotamia. Thomas began her memoir of the time she spent in Mesopotamia by reflecting on the suffering of Townshend's men. She recalled that 'although at the end of 1917 we did not yet know the story of the march, the 5 ½ month siege of Kut – "the most heroic muddle in our history" – was still being talked about'.⁶⁴⁰ Thomas herself nursed some men 'who had been through that hell' and were so frail afterwards that

⁶³⁹ Baxter, p. 293.

⁶⁴⁰ Thomas, pp. 173-4.

they were swapped for Turkish prisoners of war and treated in British hospitals.⁶⁴¹ She nevertheless reflected that they had been ‘the lucky ones’:⁶⁴²

Of the 13,000-odd made to walk into captivity, some 70 per cent had died or were to do so. With hardly any food and water and no medical attention, they had to struggle through burning hot deserts, terrible much when it rained, sand, flies, mosquitoes, and were afflicted by dysentery, malaria and heatstroke. But what they feared most was the hatred of the marauding Arabs who saw it as their Muslim duty to kill ‘infidels’. So any poor, sick soldier who fell away from the main body of captives would be tortured, killed and sometime mutilated. The Arabs even crept into the camps and stole the boots off the exhausted men, and any other kit they could find.⁶⁴³

Thomas’s discussion of the siege is a testimony to the siege’s importance to her encounter with Mesopotamia in 1917, and to its lasting importance to her understanding of the campaign. Looking back in a post-war memoir, she felt that the siege of Kut held far more significance than she had credited with at the time. The Arabs in Thomas’s account are brutal vultures who preyed on the weak – the standard story of the suffering of British prisoners after the war. As discussed in Chapter Two, it was this image of Mesopotamia’s inhabitants that came to dominate British perceptions of Mesopotamia’s Arabs. Though Thomas noted ‘the apathy and indifference of the Turks’, which she believed had allowed the Arabs to abuse the British prisoners in their care, she did not blame the Turks themselves for any maltreatment of British troops.

The Turks retained their reputation for honourable and gentlemanly behaviour, which had characterized descriptions of Ottoman troops in the first two years of the war despite reports of the maltreatment of British and Indian prisoners of war. An article in *The Times* titled ‘The Clean Fighting Turk’ called for an end to English sympathies with the Turks, calling attention to their treatment of the British soldiers who had surrendered at Kut, their massacre of the Armenians, and maltreatment of peoples under their control throughout the Middle East:

He [the Turk] has massacred, pillaged, outraged; for two years and a half he has broken every convention, maltreated our prisoners, killed our wounded, held our women hostages, but he remains the ‘clean fighting Turk’.⁶⁴⁴

⁶⁴¹ Thomas, p. 173.

⁶⁴² Thomas, p. 173.

⁶⁴³ Thomas, p. 173.

⁶⁴⁴ ‘The Clean Fighting Turk – A Spurious Claim’, *The Times*, 20 February 1917, p. 7.

But the article was met with hostility. In a response, an anonymous letter to *The Times* reminded the author of the article of how honourable an enemy the Turks had been:

When it comes to a question of honest fighting there are not, I think, low opinions about the Turk. The men in the first landing on the Peninsula, north or south, the soldiers of Sulva, the heroic forces that attempted to relieve Kut as well as those men who held it, the men who fought against overwhelming odds at Katia, whose experience entitles them to speak, do not share your correspondent's opinion. They know that, on the whole, the Turk has fought like a white man. He has never used poisoned gas or liquid fire, and he has invariably respected the white flag. He has not fired upon hospitals, and he has generally done the best that he could for our prisoners and wounded, sometimes at great personal risk.⁶⁴⁵

In another reminder of how the Mesopotamian campaign remained a step behind the modern warfare of the Western Front, the author of the letter praised the fact that the Turks 'had never used poisoned gas or liquid fire'. The letter continued a long tradition of defending 'the Turk' in Britain, which persisted throughout the early stages of the campaign and, as the letter illustrates, was difficult to undermine even after reports began emerging of Turkish maltreatment of British prisoners of war. The British affinity and respect for the Turk is here particularly highlighted in the compliment that the Turks had fought like white men, here synonymous with civilization and honour.

Stories of Arab thieving and treachery, however, continued to be prevalent for the remainder of the Mesopotamian campaign. Rev. Bennett wondered if he was safe being transported by boat alone with an Arab, and recounted a story he had heard of 'Arabs stealing a tent, with poles and ropes complete from over the sleeping forms of its occupants and the first thing the latter knew of it was when they woke up a little extra cold in the morning!'⁶⁴⁶ According to another story, they 'actually announced their intention of stealing the Colonel's and the Adjunct's horses from a certain camp – and did so too!'⁶⁴⁷ Regardless of the veracity of tales such as these, it is clear that the Arabs continued to be perceived as brazen thieves.

Captain Baxter wrote home to reassure his family that 'the Arabs here are not openly hostile, as you might expect'.⁶⁴⁸ His comments reflect the extent to which the image of Arabs as brutal men who preyed on British troops had reached

⁶⁴⁵ 'The Clean Fighting Turk' (Letters to the Editor), *The Times*, 23 February 1917, p. 5.

⁶⁴⁶ Bennett, p. 43.

⁶⁴⁷ Bennett, p. 43.

⁶⁴⁸ Baxter, p. 283.

Britain. The image of the Arabs as a small but constant threat to British personnel was, by this time, firmly entrenched. Baxter was not telling his family anything that was not common knowledge. 'Of Course', he wrote, the Arabs 'are never averse to getting money, and are quite unscrupulous how they do it'.⁶⁴⁹ But Baxter's descriptions of Arab behaviour lack the bitter hatred of the Arabs that had characterised the accounts of those who served in the first two years of the campaign. Baxter conceded that the Arabs were unscrupulous, and that they attacked weak or vulnerable targets under cover of darkness:

All Arabs are the same. So one is never quite free from pin-prick attacks. Small parties after dark are none too safe. Sentries have to keep their eyes and ears open. And in the darkness just before moonrise there is quite a possibility of a sudden raid, a little quick loot and murder, and a quick escape by the light of the newly risen moon.⁶⁵⁰

'But', he concluded, 'after all, that is what we are here for, and if we can't hold our own in that sort of a scrap, we might as well go home and guard railway bridges!'⁶⁵¹ Arab raids were a nuisance, but such 'scrap' with insignificant enemies were mere 'pin-pricks' – more annoying than dangerous. They did not frighten Baxter in the way they had frightened his colleagues in the early phases of the campaign.

Richard Pope-Hennessy wrote regularly of the trouble caused by the Arabs around the camp. His reaction upon seeing 'some Arabs in the distance' was to telephone for 'to Terry at Dujailah to fire a few rounds of shrapnel at them while Tim turned on his machine guns at a range of 1700 yards and scared them'.⁶⁵² The Arabs were regarded as a threat wherever they were seen, and were treated as any other enemy would have been. Captain Harold Dickson, by this time serving as a political officer in the Arab town of Suk al-Sheyukk, continued to complain about the behaviour of the Arabs in his district. In September 1916, Dickson noted: the Arabs 'had been firing on our patrols. We killed about 100 for certain and wounded a great many more'.⁶⁵³ He concluded that '[it] will do a lot of good, as the Arab understands nothing as much a hammering'.⁶⁵⁴ Dickson's conclusion that the Arabs could only understand

⁶⁴⁹ Baxter, p. 283.

⁶⁵⁰ Baxter, p. 283.

⁶⁵¹ Baxter, p. 283.

⁶⁵² Pope-Hennessy, p.213.

⁶⁵³ Harold Richard Patrick Dickson, Middle East Centre Archives, St Antony's College, Oxford. M/S letters, GB165-0085, Box 1, File 3A, 12 September 1916. (Hereafter Dickson)

⁶⁵⁴ Dickson, 12 September 1916.

force seems to have been reached by many of those serving in Mesopotamia at this time. His belief that he could make sweeping statements about what 'the Arab' could, or could not, understand reflects his continued belief that he understood 'the Arab mind'. Like Harold Hussey's belief that corporal punishment was the best method of communication, such statements as Dickson's suggest that Arabs were perceived only to respond to force. This echoed the assumptions made about the Arab or Oriental mind in the months before 6th Division's advance in 1915.

Alongside her description of what she saw as Arab treachery, Brown left a record of the heavy-handed response of British and Indian forces to these attacks. In one instance, 'over twenty' people believed to have been spies were 'caught and shot the other day'.⁶⁵⁵ More shockingly, in February 1917 she noted '1200 of the Somersets have gone across to shoot the Arabs and burn the villages. I passed some of the villages on Saturday, they are shut in by very high mud walls very well protected'.⁶⁵⁶ The only references to Mesopotamia's peoples in Mary Ann Brown's diary were of alleged violent crimes committed or of negative summations of Arab character. Moreover, she saw Mesopotamia's inhabitants as primitive and simple. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that she should accept such collective punishment as a reasonable response to the violence she associated with the local population.

Negative stereotypes of Indian troops as lazy or unwilling to fight in Mesopotamia continued to circulate during this period. Rev. Bennett recalled a story told to him by a Medical Officer:

An Indian military hero, with a wound, probably self-inflicted, in his trigger finger, who began by making him, so far all unsuspecting, a present of a ring looted from a dead German, and a few days later, when most cast down at the information that the finger would not need to be amputated immediately whipped out of his pocket a beautiful gold watch and chain and implored the doctor to accept it, if only that trigger finger could be irrecoverably cut away. The result was that he was kicked back to the front on the spot ('Pity I didn't get hold of the watch and chain first' added the MO) but we'll hope such cases are the very rare exception.⁶⁵⁷

Bennett's ironic reference to the Indian soldier as an 'Indian military hero' is suggestive of his general attitude towards Indian soldiers. Both he and the Medical Officer assumed that the original wound was self-inflicted and that the soldier had looted the

⁶⁵⁵ Brown, 2 January 1917.

⁶⁵⁶ Brown, 28 February 1917.

⁶⁵⁷ Bennett, p. 53.

dead bodies of German soldiers. Though the medical officer accused the man of trying to bribe him to remove his trigger finger, the man was not court-martialled. Instead, the officer simply sent him back to work. Bennett hoped, rather than believed, this to be 'a rare exception'.

Even in stories where he praised the fighting of Indian troops, Bennett's prejudices rendered his descriptions problematic. He wrote at length of 'One story of bloody war heard almost first hand [...] too good not to be recorded'. In early March 1917, as British troops fought a series of difficult offensives culminating in the capture of Baghdad on 11 March, Bennett was told the following story:

During the hard fighting in which the Devons drove the Turks out of three lines of trenches last Saturday morning one of our men fell, rather than jumped, down into the trench and next moment was rolling on the ground together with a Turk. Wrenching his arm and rifle free he was just managing to bayonet him, when one of the 1/8th Ghurkas together with whom the Devons had 'hopped the twig' rushing up, clean severed the Turk's head from his body with one blow of the famous kukri. A second Turk attacking them at the same moment, with the return swing loses his also. Upon which, what does Johnnie Gurka do, in a moment's respite, but pick up first one fallen head for inspection and then the other, saying, as one who invites well-earned approbation "Teek, Sahib? Teek?"⁶⁵⁸

The editor of Bennett's diaries and letters informs the reader that 'Teek?' meant 'All correct?'; seeking praise for his actions, the Indian soldier was asking if he had done the correct thing in killing the two Turkish soldiers. While the British and Turkish soldiers were both depicted as equals on the battlefield, the Ghurkha is a caricature of an Indian soldier. He decapitated the Turkish soldier with a uniquely Indian weapon, his 'famous kukri'. Having beheaded two men, he turned to the British soldier, and in his own language, not in English, enquired as to whether he had done the right thing. This renders the Indian soldier child-like in his simplicity. His bravery is depicted as simple learned behaviour. The manner in which he killed the two men, beheading rather than stabbing them, and using a 'native' weapon rather than an ordinary bayonet or a gun, is evocative of 'primitive' or 'tribal' warfare. The white soldier, who unlike the Ghurkha had fallen, rather than jumped, into the trench, is depicted as implicitly superior to the Indian soldier. Though it is unclear whether he actually

⁶⁵⁸ Bennett, p. 87.

outranked him, the British soldier's superiority was implied by the fact that the Ghurkha required his confirmation and in the Indian soldier's use of the word 'Sahib'.

Bennett ended his anecdote by remarking that it was no 'wonder we hear that Tommy and Johnnie are the best of friends, evidencing the same by losing 'chips' to each other at cards, and learning (save the mark) each other's language'.⁶⁵⁹ These comments are borne out in other stories of Indian bravery in the field of battle, but not in the tale he himself recorded. Captain Allan Byrom recalled one Ghurkha under his command in Northern Mesopotamia who had risked his life to replenish water supplies. Byrom remembered that the 'little Ghurka' [sic] had 'volunteered to be water drawer and carrier and begged me to let him go':

Reluctantly I consented to do so, at the same time informing him that he took his life in his own hands [...]. Several times, to the amazement and wonderment of all, he repeated his trips successfully and did not stop until all requirements were supplied. [...] I shall never quite understand how he escaped, unless it was owing to his dusky skin and undoubted skill in scout craft. [...] At the first opportunity I commended him for distinction.⁶⁶⁰

Byrom's tale of Indian bravery is very different from the one recounted by Reverend Bennett to his wife. Byrom stressed the bravery of the soldier under his command, reminding the reader that he had volunteered despite Byrom's warning about the danger in which he would be placing himself. Moreover, Byrom stressed his own amazement that the soldier had been successful in his task, and emphasised the soldier's skill as well as his skin colour. The anonymous soldier is defined by his race, his skin colour and his skill, suggesting a relationship between these attributes in Byrom's memory of the man. Given this, Byrom's suggestion that the Ghurkha's 'dusky skin' contributed to his survival can be read as an acknowledgement of the skill he associated with Ghurkha troops, rather than as a suggestion that his darker complexion made him less conspicuous to enemy fire.

The local population continued to be seen as simple or backward; their primitivism seemed to stand in stark relief to the modernity that resulted from continued British control in Mesopotamia. Reginald Campbell Thompson, then serving as a political officer at their newly installed headquarters in Baghdad, recalled the reaction of local Arabs to the Turkish and British planes overhead. He noted that 'the

⁶⁵⁹ Bennett, p. 88.

⁶⁶⁰ Byrom, p. 26.

Arabs paid no attention to these wonders, for Scheherazade's stories are full of flying carpets, so why regard them as marvels?'⁶⁶¹ His statement reflected the continuing association between the *Arabian Nights* stories and how British servicemen perceived Mesopotamia. Thompson's comment suggested that, having no real understanding of the modern technology that would enable an aircraft to exist, the Arabs could only understand them as fantastical creations, like the flying carpets of the *Arabian Nights* stories.

Thompson also suggested that Indians serving under British command had little understanding of modern technology. He recounted one story of 'the Indian bearer of my friend Blakes' who 'surpassed all efforts' by sleeping on three unexploded bombs 'until told what they were'.⁶⁶² Once again, the modern warfare of the First World War is contrasted in Thompson's account with the 'simplicity' of the Indian bearer, who despite living in a battlefield did not recognise the trappings of modern warfare as dangerous.

As British control became more widespread and took on a more permanent nature, Anglo-Mesopotamian relations became more regular and more complex. Greater opportunities for interaction between individuals allowed British servicemen and women to gain a greater understanding of the different races living in Mesopotamia, and a conception of Mesopotamians as individuals rather than members of a race whose characteristics they believe they understood and disliked. Reference has already been made to shops and restaurants that began to spring up to cater for British servicemen and women during this period of the war. In addition, men like Byrom took on jobs that forced them into far closer contact with individual Arabs.

In the last two years of the war, Allan Byrom became a political officer, and later took on a job in the department of local resources in Basra. In these roles, he came into close contact with both communities of Mesopotamian peoples and individuals – usually men. Although his descriptions of Mesopotamians continued to include broad generalisations and tales of Arab treachery, even these tales were more nuanced. He described an 'Arab raid':

These men had attacked us for two reasons. Firstly because they had been paid by the Turks to do so, and secondly they thought that as there was only a small force on that side they stood a good chance in a surprise attack, with the

⁶⁶¹ Thompson, p. 98.

⁶⁶² Thompson, p. 99.

prospect of good haul of loot. That is always an attraction the Arab, and he will risk a lot to get it [...]. [The] only result obtained was that our usual routine was disturbed, and for several days extra precautions had to be taken to prevent any more surprise attacks from mercenary Arab tribes.⁶⁶³

This description has many of the traits of earlier descriptions of Arab behaviour. Byrom referred to 'the Arab' and described the behaviour of the attacking party in terms of racial characteristics, suggesting that 'the Arab' could not help but attack, because that was his nature. However, Byrom's representation of the raid lacked the anger that had characterised earlier accounts of Arab behaviour. Moreover, in addition to broad generalisations, Byrom drew attention to the influence of Turkish powers, and made light of the impact of the raid on British servicemen.

Many of Byrom's other descriptions of Mesopotamian peoples were far more detailed than any seen in the early part of the campaign. Like many of his colleagues, he noted the large Jewish population of Baghdad, even describing their European dress and the languages spoken in the Jewish community.⁶⁶⁴ He described how being the only British officer in charge of a small region of Mesopotamia gave him the opportunity to gain 'an insight of the character, doings, and language of the Arabs that I could not otherwise have obtained'.⁶⁶⁵ He recalled that the 'natives came to [him] for advice and assistance when in difficulty regarding their private affairs. [He] also became the local medical practitioner, and occasionally found quite a little queue waiting outside [his] house in the evening'.⁶⁶⁶ Although he overestimated his grasp on the Arabic language – triumphantly mistranslating the common Arabic name Abdullah – Byrom's wish to learn enough of the local language to communicate with people suggests a willingness on his part to interact with locals.⁶⁶⁷

In his later appointment at the department of local resources in Basra, Byrom had occasion to describe different roles in Mesopotamian society: 'A mudir [...] is better class and fairly educated native, who is in Government pay and acts as a sort of district supervisor. He is responsible for the collection of all taxes from the natives in his area.'⁶⁶⁸ Byrom was even able to name individuals and to distinguishing between the different races of Mesopotamia: 'Abdulla beg, the mudir of Hartha, was a well-

⁶⁶³ Byrom, p. 29.

⁶⁶⁴ Byrom, p. 22.

⁶⁶⁵ Byrom, p. 59.

⁶⁶⁶ Byrom, p. 59.

⁶⁶⁷ Byrom, p. 63.

⁶⁶⁸ Byrom, p. 44.

built, extremely pleasant and good-looking Armenian, who before the war could not speak a word of English, and now speaks it fluently'.⁶⁶⁹ Byrom's description is notable because it departed from so many of the characteristics of early-war descriptions of Mesopotamia's peoples. Not only did he describe specific, rather than general aspects of Mesopotamian life, but he did so about an individual whom he was able not only to name, but to speak of favourably. This would have been unheard of in the early phases of the war.

The accounts of other officers, such as Captain McKeag, also contained a mixture of racial generalisations or stereotypes and more detailed accounts of interaction with individuals in Mesopotamia. McKeag wrote, for instance, that:

Physically the Arabs are splendid. They're not very big-muscled, but lithe, and extraordinarily tough. They can walk all day, even in the hot weather, and live on almost nothing, with little or no protection from cold or heat. Also they stand sanitary conditions that would kill a white man in a week, for their villages are appalling.⁶⁷⁰

McKeag generalised about the 'racial' capabilities of Arabs and white men without hesitation. His comments are noteworthy, however, because they were positive, in contrast to pre- and early-war representations of Mesopotamia's peoples, which were predominantly negative. Captain McKeag also had the opportunity to engage with individuals in Mesopotamia. He noted one Armenian: 'Daniel Effendi by name, who owns a great deal of land both here and elsewhere and has both the capital and the brains to develop it under the wing of Pax Britannica'.⁶⁷¹ Despite generalisations about race, McKeag was able to distinguish between individuals of different ethnic origins in Mesopotamia, and even to relate the story of how Daniel Effendi met and married his wife.

One of the consequences of the decision to create an infrastructure that would help the British war effort in Mesopotamia was that labour had to be imported to build roads and railways. As a result, the number of races serving under British command in Mesopotamia multiplied. In addition to coming into contact with Mesopotamian peoples of different ethnic origins, British service personnel also came into contact with an increasing number of peoples from across the world serving in the British labour corps.

⁶⁶⁹ Byrom, p. 44.

⁶⁷⁰ McKeag, p. 55.

⁶⁷¹ McKeag, p. 58.

As Reverend Bennett travelled north with British troops, he was accompanied by ‘a couple of hundred men of a Chinese Labour Corps (probably carpenters) and [...] as many Egyptians’.⁶⁷² He described the Chinese and Egyptian labourers to his wife:

They are packed in as tight as herrings, but they do not seem to mind, and I think they seem to find nearly as much interest in watching us, as we do in studying them. There are some interesting characteristic differences, apart from the obvious differences of physical features. I have seen chopsticks used for the first time [...]. [Each] man has his little china blue basin, for his tea or his rice – the Egyptian seems to rely more on his fingers – (for ‘bully and biscuit’ at any rate) – and his metal water bottle.

Among about half dozen of the Chinese there is a thick bamboo opium pipe, with a little sticking up tube in the middle, which looks like a trombone mouth piece but is really for the lighted opium. They take solemn sucks at the wide end of the bamboo in turns, and hand it on to the next one, dreaming I know not what of home and dragons and ancestors.

The Egyptians on the other hand smoke endless cigarettes; they seem to sing more than do the Chinese. All are provided with a kind of uniform and thick underclothes, but where the Egyptians have bundles, and heavy ammunition boots, the Chinese have strongly corded boxes, and light shoes, of which they without exception, tread down the sides at the heel, to use them as ‘slippers’ in the proper Oriental way. The Egyptians’ perpetual pastime is searching the seams of their undergarments – it is rather, indeed, a primitive instinct than a mere pastime; the Chinese I have hardly seen doing that at all, though whether because there is less need for it or because they themselves are more indifferent to the ‘minor horrors’ I could not say. And my scientific and ethnological instincts are not keen enough to prompt me to investigate further. I have seen the Chinese playing dominoes, and the Egyptians, I think, playing cards, and there seems to be very little sign of quarrelling even where there is little else to do. What are we carrying these sons of older civilizations along to, either ultimately, or even in this immediate campaign?⁶⁷³

Though Mesopotamia can be described as a ‘contact zone’ (to use Mary Louise Pratt’s term) in the period before the Mesopotamian campaign and at each of its stages, it is in this last phase of the campaign that Pratt’s definition of a contact zone seems particularly apt.⁶⁷⁴ What Bennett was describing in this episode, reproduced here at length to demonstrate how this interaction with peoples of ‘older civilizations’ had engrossed him, is exactly what Pratt describes: men from disparate parts of the world brought into contact by factors outside their control. It was exactly the prospect,

⁶⁷² Bennett, p. 46.

⁶⁷³ Bennett, pp. 46-7.

⁶⁷⁴ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

outlined by Pratt, of ongoing relations being formed that fascinated Bennett – though he would not have recognised them as ‘involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict’.⁶⁷⁵

Bennett celebrated the fact that these men had been brought to work under the auspices of the British war effort as proof of ‘our British Empire’s way with older civilizations’.⁶⁷⁶ In fact, he saw the interaction between British and other races as reciprocal: ‘they seem to find nearly as much interest in watching us, as we do in studying them.’ Nevertheless, Bennett saw himself as assessing, however inadequately, the behaviour of the Egyptian and the Chinese men ‘scientifically’ or ethnologically. His gaze, as Pratt’s description suggests, is not equal to that of the men he described, but superior, located within a European, scientific tradition. He assessed the men’s ‘physical features’ and noted their habits and behaviour, as an anthropologist might have done. He commented on the different ways in which they ate, what drugs appealed to them, even how much they sang and what games they played. He was particularly fascinated by the ways in which the men dealt with the western clothes and organisational structures in which they now found themselves. He was, therefore, intrigued by the way the men altered the clothes they had been given: the Chinese men’s ‘light shoes’ transformed into slippers ‘in the proper Oriental way’; the Egyptians’ ‘primitive instinct’ to search the seams of his clothing, and the way Egyptian soldiers ate familiar ‘bully beef’ in their own, unfamiliar, way.

The pressurized nature of wartime conditions and the number of different peoples forcibly brought into contact as a result of the decisions of remote powers rendered Mesopotamia all the more complex. It can therefore be better understood as a series of contact zones interacting simultaneously, each with its own power structures and hierarchies. Particularly in the second half of the war, Mesopotamia was a contact zone between a dominant white, British or western gaze and its others, but also a zone for the formation of hierarchies between other peoples brought into contact by the war under British command.

Although Bennett remarked that the Chinese and Egyptian labourers got on very well, the cohabitation of men of different races and religions caused

⁶⁷⁵ Pratt, pp. 6-7.

⁶⁷⁶ Bennett, p. 46.

problems. Margery Thomas recalled that the introduction of black soldiers from the Caribbean and Africa had presented difficulties:

The British tommies did not want to sit with the 'blacks' and the 'blacks' did not want to sit with each other. The 'blacks' were not Indians – we never saw them. These were negroes. Some, from the West Indies, were cultured, educated men, more fastidious than many a British soldier [...] but others, from the Gold Coast or Nigeria, were much less sophisticated. They had been brought in to work on the Inland Waterways, and had never seen things like cups, saucers and cutlery before, and their table manners were non-existent. So the two lots of 'blacks', who looked exactly alike, had to be found separate tables.⁶⁷⁷

Thomas's recollections illustrate the different discourses of race at play in Mesopotamia during this period. Alongside these more predictable prejudices she described ran a series of other racial hierarchies; soldiers from the Caribbean did not wish to associate with men from Africa. Thomas herself preferred the West Indian men, whom she believed to be more 'sophisticated' because they were familiar with cutlery and had other traits such as culture, education and cleanliness, which marked them out as more 'civilized' and therefore more likeable in her account. She found the men from the West coast of Africa 'much less sophisticated', because they were unfamiliar with western basics such as cutlery, cups and saucers. Thomas interpreted this as proof of their 'primitive' or base ways.

Conclusions

For many servicemen, like Byrom and Pope-Hennessy, the modern was synonymous with the west. As Mesopotamia's landscape was transformed by railways, telegraph lines and concrete roads, it became more western and therefore, less alien. Those aspects of Mesopotamia that could not be made familiar with the addition of the trappings of modernity were brought under British control though the use of modern technology: most notably through the use of aerial mapping and surveillance. British servicemen felt this technology to be so alien to the east that Mesopotamia's peoples had no way of understanding it, let alone of engaging with it independently of British or western intervention. The telegraph lines that had struck Harold Hussey as

⁶⁷⁷ Thomas, p. 171.

the only noteworthy feature in the Mesopotamian landscape and the planes that replaced flying carpets in Thompson's memories of the city of the *Arabian Nights* made Mesopotamia a less opaque and less disconcerting place for British servicemen and women. More comfortable, and with a greater freedom to travel, they looked to familiar discourses of travel and modernity to familiarise the alien in Mesopotamia's landscape. Although greater contact with individuals allowed some British men and women to see beyond the 'marauding hordes' that had dominated representations of Mesopotamia's inhabitants in the early parts of the campaign, violence continued to define Mesopotamia's population in British accounts.

5

From Armistice to Coronation: 1918-1921

The First World War transformed British perceptions of Mesopotamia. By the end of the war, Mesopotamia was no longer simply the site of the untimely death of Julian the Apostate, but that of General Sir Stanley Maude, 'hero of Baghdad'.⁶⁷⁸ It was not only remembered as the scene of the ancient battles of Alexander the Great, but as the place where Charles Townshend's brave men had held Kut-al-Amara against all odds. The Mesopotamia of 1918 had not ceased, for Britons, to be the land of the *Arabian Nights*, of Abraham, Jonah and Daniel, Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar; these pre-war perceptions of Mesopotamia were so well entrenched that they became a prism through which British travellers, journalists, diplomats, soldiers, sailors, airmen and nurses saw and interpreted Mesopotamia throughout the First World War. In the post-war period, these earlier perceptions of the region became fused with a new, wartime, vision of 'the land between the rivers' to create a modern idea of Mesopotamia in Britain. The history of the debates between, and decisions made by, those in London, Delhi and Baghdad in these years is complex, and has already been exhaustively outlined by historians of the Middle East.⁶⁷⁹ In this concluding chapter, I will not attempt to add to this already rich historiography, but will explore how pre-war and wartime perceptions of Mesopotamia combined in these crucial years.

⁶⁷⁸ 'Sir Stanley Maude: Memorial Service in St. Paul's', *The Times*, 5 December 1917, p. 11.

⁶⁷⁹ See for example: Briton Cooper Busch, *Britain, India, and the Arabs: 1914-1921* (Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 1971); Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied* (London: Hurst, 2003); D.K. Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East: 1914-58* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Elie Kedourie, *England and the Middle East: The Destruction of the Ottoman Empire* (London: The Haverster Press, 1978); David E. Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control: the Royal Air Force 1919-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: the Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Peter Sluglett; *Britain in Iraq 1914- 1932* (London: Ithaca Press, 1976); Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

In the days after the armistice with Turkey on 30 October 1918, British troops under the Command of General Sir William Marshall occupied the city of Mosul. There had been little movement on the Mesopotamian front since the occupation of the northern city of Tikrit, in November 1917. Although troops from the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force had been sent into Persia, 1918 had seen only one major battle in Mesopotamia before British troops moved to occupy Mosul on 3 November. The fact that the city was occupied after the Armistice of Mudros meant that Mosul was not officially declared part of the soon-to-be-created Kingdom of Iraq until 1926. This was one of many uncertainties that plagued those who set about creating the new state. As Gertrude Bell lamented during the war, London's inability, or unwillingness, to lay claim to Mesopotamia hindered nascent attempts at forming an effective administration.⁶⁸⁰ This is a point that had been made by others throughout the campaign. In response to the criticism of the Mesopotamia Commission, for instance, Sir Beauchamp Duff argued that he could not possibly have provided adequate equipment for a campaign whose aims and objectives had never been clearly defined by the government in London, and were consequently changing on an almost weekly basis.⁶⁸¹ In a letter dated 15 July 1916 – eight months before Maude's troops had even occupied Baghdad – Bell reflected on the difficulties of establishing an administration in a country 'which is all beginnings'.⁶⁸² She insisted that the 'real difficulty under which we labour here is that we don't know, and I suppose can't know till the end of the war, exactly what we intend to do in this country'.⁶⁸³ However, the uncertainty of which Gertrude Bell despaired continued to characterise Mesopotamia in the years immediately following the war.

As Britain embarked upon the task of creating a state out of three provinces with 'no historical, religious or ethnic homogeneity', it was daily reminded of the difficulties – and cost – of empire-building by circumstances elsewhere in its

⁶⁸⁰ Gertrude Bell, Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University Library, Newcastle. Letter dated 15 July 1916 <http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=185> [accessed 19 April 2010]. (Hereafter: Bell, 15 July 1916).

⁶⁸¹ *Royal Commission Appointed by Act of Parliament to Enquire into the Operation of War in Mesopotamia. Reports etc. Report Together with a Separate Report by J. Wedgwood, and Appendices* (London: H.M.S.O, 1917), Appendix 2, p. 166.

⁶⁸² Bell, 15 July 1916.

⁶⁸³ Bell, 15 July 1916.

empire.⁶⁸⁴ By mid 1918, all 26 southern counties of Ireland were Sinn Fein strongholds, practically under martial law.⁶⁸⁵ The Easter Rising of 1916 had created martyrs and mythology for the Republican movement that would act as a catalyst for the creation of the Irish Free State in 1921. In India – still the most prized of Britain’s imperial possessions and central to British policy in Mesopotamia throughout the war – a growingly united and vocal nationalist movement was succeeding in gaining concessions towards greater autonomy from Britain. The Lucknow Pact of 1916 united the Congress Party and the Muslim League, and frightened Britain into Montagu’s 1917 declaration and later the introduction of Indian officers into the Indian Army. These concessions were followed in 1919 by limited constitutional reforms.⁶⁸⁶ Britain approached the tricky business of ‘nation-building’ in the Mesopotamian *vilayets* a less confident imperial nation than it had been in 1914. As Lord Islington (Liberal), former under-secretary of state for India and head of the National Savings Agency, told the House of Lords in a debate on Mesopotamia:

A time has come when we have to make up our minds as a country that we can no longer undertake to be either the rulers or the protectors of the whole of the world, and if we try [...] ineffectively [to] undertake this protection, to my mind it is the most sure means of damaging our prestige in these countries. It would be much better for us to have no garrison there at all.⁶⁸⁷

This speech, which prefigured Bonar Law’s famous declaration only two years later that Britain could no longer ‘act as the policeman for the world’, makes explicit what was implicit in the debates on prestige during the war: Britain was a less confident imperial nation than it had been, and men like Lord Islington wanted Britain’s commitments circumscribed to protect what was left of British ‘prestige in these countries’. There was, however, no consensus in London or in India as to what should be done with Mesopotamia.

⁶⁸⁴ Fieldhouse, p. 70.

⁶⁸⁵ Kenneth O. Morgan, ‘The Twentieth Century’ in *The Oxford History of Britain Vol. V: The Modern Age*, ed. by Kenneth O. Morgan (Oxford University Press: 1992), pp. 65-164 (p. 77).

⁶⁸⁶ A.J. Stockwell, ‘The War and the British Empire’ in *Britain and the First World War* ed. by John Turner (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), pp. 36-52 (p. 47).

⁶⁸⁷ ‘Mesopotamia’ [Debate in House of Lords 25 June 1920] in *Hansard 1803-2005*, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1920/jun/25/mesopotamia#S5LV0040PO_19200625_HOL_43> [accessed 26 November 2009].

The Mandate for Mesopotamia

The award of the Mandate for Mesopotamia to Britain at the San Remo conference of April 1920 was met with much criticism in Britain. Many, including former prime minister Herbert Asquith, argued that accepting a Mandate for a territory that included all three of the former Ottoman provinces was too great a burden on the post-war British state. If the benefit of a continued British presence in Mesopotamia was to gain access to oil reserves and maintain a route to India, then these aims, Asquith and others argued, could be achieved far more easily, and far less expensively, by retaining only the former Ottoman *vilayets* of Basra and/or Baghdad. This, they believed, would allow Britain all the benefits of the Mesopotamian mandate at a fraction of the cost. *The Times* ran several long leaders arguing that it would be madness to accept responsibility for all three provinces at a time when the British taxpayer was being asked to pay more and more.⁶⁸⁸ Although the paper also questioned whether accepting the Mandate was contrary to the terms of the Armistice of Mudros, or whether it undermined the rights of Mesopotamia's peoples to autonomous government as envisioned by the League of Nations, the question at the heart of its critique of the government's policy was always: 'how much will Mesopotamia cost the British taxpayer?'⁶⁸⁹ The paper's criticism of the government was relentless. In addition to its own coverage, *The Times* published letters arguing that the government should not accept the terms of the Mandate as they stood. In one such letter, Lord Islington asked whether Britain could 'afford to continue this lavish expenditure, drawn from the British taxpayer's pocket, on countries like Mesopotamia and Palestine'.⁶⁹⁰ 'An Observer' who described him/herself as 'an imperialist of long standing' worried in a letter to *The Times* in June 1920 that 'the cause of Empire may be ruined and the back of the nation broken by our undertaking the weight of indefinite responsibilities [in Mesopotamia]'.⁶⁹¹

⁶⁸⁸ See for example: 'The Troubles of Kurdistan', *The Times*, 2 February 1920, p. 13; 'Mesopotamia and the Mandate', *The Times*, 27 March 1920, p. 15; 'Mesopotamia', *The Times*, 1 June 1920, p. 17.

⁶⁸⁹ 'Mesopotamia', *The Times*, 1 June 1920, p. 17.

⁶⁹⁰ 'Middle East: Our Obligations' [Letters to the Editor], *The Times*, 29 May 1920, p. 10.

⁶⁹¹ 'Mesopotamia', *The Times*, 1 June 1920, p. 17.

On the other side of the debate, less frequently reproduced on *The Times'* pages, others argued that it was vital to Britain's interests to keep Mesopotamia. Many continued to see the region as an important pathway to India, and a necessary factor in the protection of Britain's Indian Empire. Others argued that it would be wrong to give up territory that had been gained by the bloodshed of British soldiers. Many more still asserted that Mesopotamia was a region that, with only a little investment, would yield great rewards for Britain in terms of oil revenue, but also in terms of agricultural production. As one correspondent concluded in a letter to *The Times*, 'cutting our losses in this case is not good business'.⁶⁹² In a speech to the House of Lords in June 1920, Viscount Goschen, British ambassador to Berlin at the outbreak of the First World War, summarised the debate on Mesopotamia accurately and succinctly: 'In this country there have been two schools of thought with regard to Mesopotamia — the optimists who thought it was a Garden of Eden where everything could be grown, and the pessimists, who regarded it as a bare desert'.⁶⁹³

As Goschen's reference to the 'Garden of Eden' suggests, those who believed that Mesopotamia could flourish under British tutelage often framed their argument not in terms of creating a new prosperous state, but in terms of *restoring* the 'Garden of Eden' to its former fertility. In the same debate, for instance, Lord Sydenham argued that, contrary to the assertions of those who argued that Britain simply could not extend its commitments to an empire in the Middle East, Britons remained 'more fitted than any other people to undertake the work of bringing back peace and prosperity to a country which has been ruined by centuries of Turkish misrule'.⁶⁹⁴ Britain's role in Mesopotamia was, for him, not to *create* peace and prosperity, but to 'bring [them] back'. Sydenham went on to argue that 'to *restore* the lost riches of Mesopotamia is merely a question of capital and of labour, gradually and intelligently brought to bear'.⁶⁹⁵

Arguments such as Sydenham's drew on visions of the region as the Garden of Eden or at its zenith under Abbasid, Assyrian or Babylonian dynasties. Where such imagery, familiar from before the war, was employed in these post-war

⁶⁹² James Wishart, 'Mesopotamia: Return for Money Spent' [Letters to the Editor], *The Times*, 30 June 1920, p.12.

⁶⁹³ 'Mesopotamia' [Debate in House of Lords 25 June 1920] in *Hansard 1803-2005*.

⁶⁹⁴ 'Mesopotamia' [Debate in House of Lords 25 June 1920] in *Hansard 1803-2005*.

⁶⁹⁵ 'Mesopotamia' [Debate in House of Lords 25 June 1920] in *Hansard 1803-2005*. My emphasis.

years, it was most often used to argue that this was Britain's chance to reap the rewards of overseeing the 'restoration of the Garden of Eden', as Willcocks had termed his irrigation project of 1910-11.

Whilst pre-war and wartime representations of Mesopotamia were central to the rhetoric of those who wished to encourage British involvement in Mesopotamia, those who argued that Mesopotamia could not repay British investment often framed their arguments around more recent, wartime images of the region and its inhabitants. Writing in 1920, Sir George Buchanan, the engineer sent to Mesopotamia during the war to design and establish a railway system, argued in *The Times*' pages that the Arabs of Mesopotamia were simply not ready to 'be civilized in a hurry'.⁶⁹⁶ Echoing sentiments expressed by Sir Mark Sykes in 1907, Buchanan drew on a pre-war image of the Arab as a lazy, ineffectual worker, paralysed by oriental fatalism. More powerfully, perhaps, in the same year as Charles Townshend's memoir of the war, *My Campaign in Mesopotamia*,⁶⁹⁷ and the second edition of Major Edward Sandes's account of the suffering of those taken prisoner after the surrender of the siege of Kut, *In Kut and Captivity*,⁶⁹⁸ were being published, Buchanan argued that the Mandate was too great a price to pay to civilize 'the peaceful Arab [whom he had seen] behind the battlefront, digging up our graves and throwing our dead about for the sake of looting their uniforms and boots', and concluded that he 'would rather see the British taxpayer's money spent in this country'.⁶⁹⁹ It was their reputation for behaviour such as this that had caused so much hatred of the Arabs among British servicemen and women during the war. The image of unscrupulous Arabs desecrating the graves or bodies of loved ones so recently lost would have been a powerful disincentive against further British investment – both in lives and money – in Mesopotamia. Buchanan's language gestured towards the savagery attributed to Mesopotamia's Arabs during the war; his sarcastic reference to the 'peaceful Arab' alluded to the reputation for disloyalty and random violence that Mesopotamians had acquired during the war, and subtly reinforced the distance his letter suggested

⁶⁹⁶ George C. Buchanan, 'Our Commitments Under the Mandate: A Too Great Attempt' [Letters to the Editor], *The Times*, 21 June 1920, p. 10.

⁶⁹⁷ Charles Vere Ferreres Townshend, Sir, K.C.B., *My Campaign in Mesopotamia [...]* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1920).

⁶⁹⁸ Edward Warren Caulfield Sandes, *In Kut and Captivity: With the Sixth Indian Division* [1919] (London: John Murray, 1920).

⁶⁹⁹ Buchanan, 'Our Commitments Under the Mandate'.

between Arabs and Britons in terms of civilization or progress. Buchanan further emphasised the difference he perceived between Britons and Arabs by his repetition of the word 'our': 'our graves [...] our dead'; this repetition, following closely on from the emotive image of British dead being looted by Arabs, encouraged an emotional, patriotic response from his readership, and reminded them of Buchanan's core argument: that to accept the Mandate proposed at San Remo did not serve 'our', British, interests, and that those whom it might benefit were neither ready for, nor worthy of, British civilization.

The Revolt

The revolt of 1920, David Omissi asserts, 'shook the very foundations of British rule in Mesopotamia'.⁷⁰⁰ In the months after Sir Arnold Wilson was appointed acting Civil Commissioner in Baghdad, growing unrest, fed by an attempt by nationalists to occupy the city of Mosul in May 1920, festered into a widespread rebellion. The revolt had its roots in dissatisfaction with British rule, but soon drew supporters from among all those who felt their interests were threatened by the prospect of permanent British control in Mesopotamia. Motivated variously by hopes of creating a Muslim or Arab state, resistance to the high levels of inflation and taxation, and the resentment of ex-Ottoman officials whose jobs were now in British hands, the revolt had an enormous impact on the debate on the Mandate in Britain.⁷⁰¹

A.T. Wilson was widely blamed for losing control of the situation in Mesopotamia, but he was restrained at every stage by an indecisive home government that neither gave him a policy to follow, nor allowed him to manage the situation as he saw fit. With no guidance from London, the acting Civil Commissioner set about finding a suitable mode of interim Iraqi government. His idea was to set up a Central Legislative Council headed by a High Commissioner. Wilson wrote to London for permission to announce this scheme, but was prevented from doing so time and again. On 5 May 1920, the government in London issued a statement on the need for an Iraqi

⁷⁰⁰ Omissi, p.22.

⁷⁰¹ Fieldhouse, p. 87; Sluglett, p. 34; Tripp, pp. 40-5.

civil administration; this aroused nationalist condemnation in Mesopotamia. Arnold Wilson once more asked for urgent permission to publish his plans, but was stalled once again. By late June 1920 the rising was in progress, and Wilson's plans had to be abandoned.⁷⁰²

During the summer of 1920, violent raids spread across Mesopotamia. Railway and telegraph lines were vandalised, compromising British communications and supply lines. Several British political officers, and some of their wives, were kidnapped. Some, including the infamous Colonel Leachman, were killed. The rebels commanded large numbers of followers, and were well armed. David Omissi has noted that at the height of the rebellion, in August 1920, they 'fielded about 131 000 men, of whom perhaps half were armed with modern rifles'.⁷⁰³ When increasing numbers of ground troops failed to suppress the Arab and Kurdish rebels, the Royal Air Force was used to bring an end to the rising. As Jafna Cox and others have shown, this set a controversial precedent in the methods used to police Mesopotamia. Well into the 1920s, RAF planes were being used to enforce British taxation policy, often indiscriminately killing civilian women and children in their wake.⁷⁰⁴ Charles Tripp estimates that 'the revolt cost the lives of an estimated 6,000 Iraqis and roughly 500 British and Indian troops'.⁷⁰⁵

As the summer of 1920 progressed, attention was drawn away from the fiscal commitments the British treasury was being asked to make in Mesopotamia to the growing violence and the growing list of British casualties. Headlines such as 'More Trouble in Mesopotamia',⁷⁰⁶ 'Mesopotamia Revolt Spreads: 400 British Casualties',⁷⁰⁷ and 'Anarchy in Mesopotamia: Tribes Hostile and Alert – Extensive Damage to Communications'dogged the government.⁷⁰⁸ With each escalation in violence, the garrison in Mesopotamia was enlarged, and the expenditure of the British taxpayer increased. By August 1920, *The Times* declared that Mesopotamia was 'simmering with

⁷⁰² Fieldhouse, pp. 80-86.

⁷⁰³ Omissi, p. 23.

⁷⁰⁴ See in particular, Jafna L. Cox, 'A Splendid Training Ground: The Importance to the Royal Air Force of its Role in Iraq, 1919-32', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 13 (1985), 157- 184; Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, and Priya Satia, 'The Defence of Inhumanity'.

⁷⁰⁵ Tripp, p. 44.

⁷⁰⁶ 'More Trouble in Mesopotamia', *The Times*, 12 June 1920, p. 17.

⁷⁰⁷ 'Mesopotamia Revolt Spreads: 400 Casualties', *The Times*, 20 July 1920, p.12.

⁷⁰⁸ 'Anarchy in Mesopotamia: Tribes Hostile and Alert – Extensive Damage to Communications', *The Times*, 8 September 1920, p. 10.

insurgence'.⁷⁰⁹ The newspaper ran a series of editorials criticising the civil commissioner, Sir Arnold Wilson, for allowing the situation to become so serious, and the government for its spending in Mesopotamia and commitment to accepting the Mandate despite the evident resistance from Mesopotamia's population. *The Times'* most vehement criticism was reserved for the decision to allow British women and children to move to Mesopotamia before the country was entirely stable. Public attention was drawn to the dangers faced by British women and children by the capture, in August 1920, of Mrs Buchanan.

The paper reported that 'Mrs Buchanan [...] was captured by the Arabs at Shahroban, on the Persian road, when her husband, Mr. E.L. Buchanan, and other officers of the Mesopotamian service were killed in action'.⁷¹⁰ Mrs Buchanan's husband had served as a Captain in the Royal Flying Corps in France during the war, and had been posted to Mesopotamia as Assistant Irrigation Officer. Early reports suggested the Buchanans had their son with them and that he too had been taken hostage, but he was soon reported to be safe with his grandmother, in London. This family's ordeal focused the public's attention on the growing violence in Mesopotamia – particularly the threat to British women. In one editorial, *The Times* compared the situation of wives in Mesopotamia to the capture of Lady Florentina Sale following the infamous British defeat at Kabul in 1842:

We may admire the fortitude and devotion of these women, who naturally sought to join their husbands, but no words can be too severe in condemnation of the folly of sending British wives and children by the hundred to one of the most trying climates in the world, and scattering them about a region still under military occupation. There has been no precedent for this recklessness since the wives of officers were permitted to join their husbands at Kabul eighty years ago, and the story of the ultimate sufferings of LADY SALE and her companions is well known.⁷¹¹

The story of Lady Sale, to which *The Times* referred, was also the story of Major-General William Elphinstone's infamous defeat in 1842. Having lost Kabul to Afghan troops, an ill and elderly Elphinstone was allowed to take the British community and camp followers and leave the city. The party of over 16,000 British and Indian men,

⁷⁰⁹ 'The Risings in Mesopotamia', *The Times*, 7 August 1920, p. 11.

⁷¹⁰ 'Lonely Outposts of Mesopotamia', *The Times*, 23 Aug 1920, p.9.

⁷¹¹ 'British Policy in Mesopotamia', *The Times*, 24 August 1920, p. 11.

women and children left Kabul in early January 1842, and in harsh winter conditions tried to reach the nearest British-held town of Jellalabad, 90 miles away.⁷¹²

Almost immediately after leaving the city, the party was attacked; only a handful of men and women survived. The massacre of so many British troops and civilians caused outrage in Britain and India. A small number of officers, including Elphinstone and his deputy, Brigadier John Shelton, Lady Sale and other wives of officers, reluctantly surrendered to the Afghan forces, and were held captive in Kabul until the autumn of 1842. Lady Sale was rescued by her husband, Sir Robert Sale, and her account of her experiences, *A Journal of the Disasters in Afghanistan: A Firsthand Account by One of the Few Survivors*, was published in 1843. The popularity of this volume, the infamy of Elphinstone's surrender and death in captivity, and the scandal of the loss of so large a British force ensured that Lady Sale's story became widely known.⁷¹³

The Times' reference to the trials of Lady Sale would have been deeply disturbing to a contemporary audience because of its allusion to the danger to British women in Mesopotamia, but also because it suggested that for the second time since British forces landed in Mesopotamia they were in danger of a humiliating defeat. In his introduction to an edited volume of Lady Sale's memoir, Patrick Macrory notes that the loss of Kabul in 1842 was 'one of the greatest defeats ever inflicted upon the British by an Asian enemy, an ugly massacre and a blow to Britain's prestige unequalled until, one hundred years later almost to the month, Singapore fell to the Japanese'.⁷¹⁴ The siege of Kut has been described in almost exactly the same terms by modern historians; Priya Satia writes of IEF D's surrender that 'no other British army had surrendered with its colors since the battle of Yorktown in 1781, and none would again until Singapore fell in 1942'.⁷¹⁵ For *The Times'* contemporary audience, the parallels between Kut and the loss of Kabul would have been all the more resonant. The fears surrounding Mesopotamia in 1920 were, therefore, manifold.

⁷¹² Mowbray Morris, *The First Afghan War* (London: Sampson Low, 1878), p.87. Morris estimates that the party was made up of 4,500 fighting men, only 700 of whom were Europeans, and 12,000 camp followers.

⁷¹³ Patrick Macrory writes that the memoir was 'reprinted four times, a total printing of 7,500 copies'. Patrick Macrory, *Military Memoirs, Lady Sale: The First Afghan War* (London: Longman's, 1969), pp. xviii-xix.

⁷¹⁴ Macrory, p. ix.

⁷¹⁵ Priya Satia, 'Developing Iraq: Britain, India and the Redemption of Empire and Technology in the First World War', *Past and Present*, 197 (2007), 211-255 (pp.211-212)

Primarily, many in British political and public life worried about the cost of a long-term British commitment to Mesopotamia. Hidden within these concerns, as the comments of men such as Lord Islington suggest, was the underlying anxiety for British prestige or standing on the world stage. What would happen to Britain's international reputation if commitments in the Middle East revealed the cracks in Britain's control of its empire? Worries about British prestige were heightened by the volatile situation in Mesopotamia during the summer of 1920, as scenes of seemingly unrestrained violence threatened to undermine Britain's control, and therefore its prestige, in the east. If the ability to guarantee the safety of the most vulnerable in the British community was seen as a measure of Britain's control in that region, it is unsurprising that the focus of public apprehension, as described in the contemporary press, should have been on the British women and children in Mesopotamia.

Fiction

Many of the anxieties of this period were captured in fictional representations of the years between the Armistice and the coronation of Faisal. Maud L. Eade's *The Tawny Desert* (1929)⁷¹⁶ and F.S. Brereton's *Scouts of the Baghdad Patrols* (1921) are both set during the years between Armistice and coronation.⁷¹⁷ Although very different in genre, style and readership, both novels reflect the uncertainty that characterised British attitudes towards Mesopotamia in this period and capture the altered nature of post-war British perceptions of Mesopotamia. It is through these two texts that I would like to trace the changes in British perceptions of Mesopotamia in this period more closely. Both novels depict Mesopotamia at its most unstable. During the war, Britons described Mesopotamia as a place characterised by its shifting allegiances, shifting landscapes, and uncontrollable or unbearable weather conditions. In the post-war years, Mesopotamia was in a state of flux, rendering a region already characterised by instability in the British imagination all the more so.

⁷¹⁶ Maud L. Eades, *The Tawny Desert: A Romance of the I.W.T. (Inland Water Transport Section of the Royal Engineers) in Mesopotamia* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1929).

⁷¹⁷ Frederick Sadleir Brereton, *Scouts of the Baghdad Patrols etc.* (London: Cassell & Co, 1921).

Frederick S. Brereton's *Scouts of the Baghdad Patrols* is a boys' adventure story set predominantly in post-war Baghdad. Mick Dent, an upstanding young British man, has been orphaned during the war. He travels out to Mesopotamia to join his uncle's thriving business. Upon his arrival, he establishes the first Scout troop in the city. Mick's Scouts accept boys of many different ethnic backgrounds: Swedes, Spaniards, Irishmen and Welshmen, 'Armenian boys of decidedly Jewish appearance, three Arabs, the son of the Turkish official before-mentioned, and a host of other youngsters [...]'.⁷¹⁸ Mick sets about training his recruits, 'boys, dressed practically like soldiers', to act as a self-appointed police force in Baghdad. During the course of the novel, the boys encounter a gang of evil Arab criminals; among other lawless activities, the gang is bent on appropriating the business run by Mick's uncle, Samuel Dent, by unscrupulous means. When the boys humiliate the criminals, the Arab gang is ordered to kill all the boys in the Baghdad patrols. Risking life and limb, the boys help Baghdad's ineffectual (native) police force to find the gang and arrest them, saving Samuel Dent's business and several lives along the way.

Brereton's narrative is imbued with the anticipation of the coming violence of the rebellion. Baghdad's population is depicted as gratuitously violent. As one of the boys, Jack, explains:

In England, I understand, a murderer is looked upon with horror; in my country, Spain, [...] a murderer is hunted down promptly; but in Mesopotamia a knife thrust is common, these natives are intensely cruel in many cases, and while decent people wouldn't think of cutting the throat of a harmless Scout, a native here would rejoice in the act, if he thought he had reason for it; for instance, if he wanted to revenge himself.⁷¹⁹

The people of Baghdad, therefore, are neither 'decent' nor, Jack suggests, would they hesitate at cutting the throat of 'harmless Scout'. Jack's speech paints Baghdad's population as sadistic: 'rejoicing' in inflicting pain on a group of children doing no harm at all.

The violence described here and throughout the novel is central to Brereton's plot. *Scouts of the Baghdad Patrols* turns upon a group of grown Arab men hunting down and trying to murder a group of young, unarmed boys. Only once is the threat of the revolt made explicit; Brereton's narrator notes that 'almost every day

⁷¹⁸ Brereton, *Scouts*, p. 74.

⁷¹⁹ Brereton, *Scouts*, p. 168.

brought its tale of Arab uprisings, of the cutting off of some convoy or isolated station, of an attack upon the railway running up from Basra, and of other acts of violence'.⁷²⁰ However, in the midst of almost unceasing description of Arab violence and duplicity, this mention of the revolt is hardly noteworthy. This unrelentingly violent image of Mesopotamia's inhabitants has its roots in wartime accounts of Mesopotamia's inhabitants, as Brereton's narrator explains:

Mesopotamia was still a country filled with dangers to the British [...]. Malcontents, who had troubled the Turks by acting as marauders, and who now that the British had come were thorns in the flesh, [...] were forever carrying out some unlawful expedition.⁷²¹

Here the link to the war is made explicit with references to the behaviour of the Arabs during the campaign. In a continuation of wartime descriptions, the Arabs in this account continue to be characterised by fickle or non-existent loyalties, and are harassing British forces, where once they hounded the Turks. Wartime accounts frequently described gangs of Arabs as 'marauding'; using such vocabulary in the novel reiterates the link with these perceptions of Mesopotamia's inhabitants. The fact that violence continues in Mesopotamia despite the fact that the country is nominally at peace suggests that such behaviour is an inherent part of Mesopotamian society, rather than a reaction to the war.

The duplicity of Arabs is embodied in this novel by the character of Selim. One of Samuel Dent's trusted employees, Selim works with the evil Mahmud to kidnap Dent and force him to sign his business over to Selim. Luckily, Sam Dent is rescued by his nephew and his friend Sandy – cunningly disguised as Arabs. The duplicity of the Arab is uncomplicated: he simply is not the loyal employee he pretends to be. By contrast, the boys' ability to disguise themselves and to shift seamlessly between races and even genders is a more empowering shape-shifting. As with the wartime stories in which a British soldier 'became' an Arab, these transformations mirror the doubled nature of the Arab as defined during the war, but they also transform what is essentially a destabilizing and unsettling characteristic of Mesopotamia's people into a skill that enables British protagonists to take control of an unstable situation and make it safe once more.

⁷²⁰ Brereton, *Scouts*, p. 159.

⁷²¹ Brereton, *Scouts*, p. 98.

In *Scouts of the Baghdad Patrols*, it is at the Arch of Ctesiphon that the boys first encounter a group of Arab thieves reminiscent of Ali Baba's motley crew. The thieves trap the children in a small cave, and their leader orders his men to kill them all: "'See" he yelled. "They do not fire, these infants. They are afraid to handle rifles. Then they are unarmed! Slaughter every one of them."'⁷²² The children's youth and innocence is highlighted in their description as 'infants' – even younger and more helpless children than they really are. The innate violence of the Arab, on the other hand, is here reflected in the villain's expectation that young children be able to handle firearms, and in his ordering the children's murder even though he believes them to be entirely unarmed.

Brereton's novel traces several of the changing conceptions of Mesopotamia itself and of its inhabitants. One of the most notable changes brought to the fore in *Scouts of the Baghdad Patrols* is the impact the war has had upon sites in Mesopotamia. Like the servicemen and women discussed in Chapter Four, Brereton's characters and narrator have changed their descriptions of Mesopotamian landmarks. Some, such as the Arch of Ctesiphon, have come to signify an entirely new set of cultural references, rooted in the war.

The Arch is described several times in Brereton's novel, and serves as a key site of action for his protagonists. The descriptions of the Arch highlight the extent to which it has become defined in Britain by the story of Townshend's advance to Baghdad. The boys hint that the Arch may have had some significance before it became associated with Townshend; they describe it on two occasions as 'the old, broken-down tomb of some almost forgotten Caliph who ruled in these parts'⁷²³ and as 'the ancient tomb of the long-extinct Caliph',⁷²⁴ but both these references to a past beyond Townshend's involvement are vague and barely accurate. The Arch was not a 'tomb', unless we think of it in the terms described by Pope-Hennessy as the burial place of Townshend's men and the men who followed in their steps in the advance towards Baghdad on 1917; the 'Caliph' to whom the boys misleadingly attribute the Arch is 'long-extinct' or 'almost-forgotten'. These descriptions accurately reflect the shift in British perceptions of this historical site. The Arch's history – the kings, soldiers

⁷²² Brereton, *Scouts*, p. 114.

⁷²³ Brereton, *Scouts*, p. 87.

⁷²⁴ Brereton, *Scouts*, pp. 75-6.

and Caliphs who had made it interesting for earlier travellers – have become irrelevant, and the Arch of Ctesiphon has assumed a new significance: one almost entirely concerned with Charles Townshend and the 6th Division's contribution to Britain's war effort.

The boys even go on a trip to the Arch to trace Townshend's advance – a tourist-trail parody of the advance of the soldiers two years before:

That's Kut-el Amara up there, where Townshend and his gallant division held out for so many starving months, and beyond we shall be able to trace his line of advance right up to Ctesiphon, where he fought, and, incidentally, where the reinforced British army, which later invaded the country, broke up the Turkish line at Kut, and later captured Baghdad. You will find that city an interesting place Tom – far better, far cleaner and sweeter now that it is British.⁷²⁵

Mick's description could be that of a teacher on a trip with a group of school children, or even that of a tourist guide. The significance of both Kut al-Amara and the Arch have here become suffused with the story of Townshend and his men. As ever, Brereton does not miss a chance to praise the influence of British rule, emphasising the improvements to Kut to his young readership. Just as newspaper accounts of Townshend and his men in the wake of the surrender of Kut had done, Brereton's characters erase any negative associations: only the positive aspects of Townshend's advance are reproduced.

Race or ethnic identity plays an important role in the novel, with each of the main characters representing his 'people'. Whilst a predictable hierarchy of races operates within the novel, the inclusion of boys from so many different ethnic backgrounds serves to highlight the complex approaches to difference – whether European or otherwise – within the novel. Evan, for example, is Welsh. He is good-humouredly called 'Effan' by the boys, because that is how he pronounces his own name. This draws attention to Evan's ethnicity throughout the novel. Juan Alvarez's name is deemed unpronounceable and immediately changed to John, and then to the more familiar Jack. Juan's name is anglicised to the point of unrecognisability. The 'Dutch boy Scout's' name, meanwhile, gets no mention at all: he is called 'Jim, simply because his own particular name was unpronounceable. It was Jim, the Dutch Boy

⁷²⁵ Brereton, *Scouts*, p. 54.

Scout, Van something or other in his native country, but christened Jim for the sake of convenience'.⁷²⁶

The boys' heterogeneous identities are subsumed into a British, martial, imperial identity embodied in the Boy Scout movement. This can be read as a metaphor for empire: the scouts see themselves as embracing difference and spreading values of discipline, hard-work, and logical reasoning. However, this is ultimately an all-subsuming, self-serving exercise. There is no real parity between Europeans and non-Europeans, or between British boys and other Europeans; rather, an immediate hierarchy is installed. The boys elect Mick as their leader, with high hopes of finding that:

[A] noble heart beats under the dusky skins of the brats you see in Baghdad. If they could be caught young and trained young, and fine ideas could be pumped into their heads at the impressionable age, they might grow up honest, decent, gallant citizens, unharmed by other influences which might surround them.⁷²⁷

In her introduction to Robert Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys*, Elleke Boehmer argues that the Boy Scout movement had its roots in the insecurities engendered in Britain by the Boer War. Part of the movement's appeal, she notes, was its pre-occupation with creating good, strong, martial young boys from all classes, who would go on to serve the empire. Boehmer explains that:

Modelled on the hardy colonial frontiersman, the ideal Scout, disciplined and self-sacrificing, is also set up as the culmination point of a mythical lineage of British national history: he embodies the *virtu* and honour of the medieval knight, the stout-hearted courage of the Elizabethan explorer. [...] Scouting will be to imperial Britain the training in discipline and patriotism that latter-day imperial Rome so woefully lacked.⁷²⁸

Boehmer's interest is in locating the driving forces in Edwardian society that made Scouting so popular in the early twentieth century. The Scouts of Brereton's novel certainly aspire to the characteristics she identifies, and, as I have argued, their drive to be good British imperial agents – representing the very best of their people in the east and hoping to convert young Arab boys before they become tainted by the eastern habits – is made explicit in the novel. If, as Boehmer asserts, scouting was in

⁷²⁶ Brereton, *Scouts*, p. 91.

⁷²⁷ Brereton, *Scouts*, p. 63

⁷²⁸ Elleke Boehmer, 'Introduction', in Robert Baden Powell, *Scouting for Boys: A Handbook for Instructions in Good Citizenship*, ed. by Elleke Boehmer (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 2005), p. xix.

part made popular by fears over Britain's imperial standing at the turn of the century, then we can read its centrality to this post-war vision of Mesopotamia – set in the year Britain was debating the possibility of taking on the responsibility of the Mesopotamian Mandate without 'losing prestige', to use Lord Islington's words – as an assertion that, unlike Rome, Britain continued to produce young men of good stock who were willing and eager to take on the imperial mantle.

Maud L. Eades's *The Tawny Desert: A Romance of the I.W.T. [...] in Mesopotamia* is, at its heart, a love story. It begins with a young, brave Englishwoman in distress: Sheila Hereford is stranded in the desert, surrounded by Arabs. Captain Mervyn Manners, a quietly heroic 'Britisher' liked and respected by his colleagues at the Inland Water Transport section of the Royal Engineers, comes to her rescue. When Sheila – still in the nightdress she was wearing when her brother, Major Clifford Hereford's, ship came under attack – and Mervyn (recently shot by Arabs in the attempt to rescue Miss Hereford) meet, it is love at first sight. Unfortunately, Mervyn is already engaged to Electra Mordaunt, a nurse and wartime colleague of Sheila's in Bombay. Electra is everything Sheila is not: unfaithful, immoral and duplicitous. While Mervyn loyally attempts to repress his true love for Sheila in order to honour his engagement to Electra, Electra herself is cavorting with other officers and casting aspersions on Sheila's unblemished reputation. In the course of the novel, Mervyn escapes several attempts on his life by an evil Arab, and is saved from an unfair conviction of the brutal beating of his Indian cook, Ventakaswamy, (actually beaten by the aforementioned Arab) only by Sheila's intervention. Meanwhile, Sheila is busy rebuffing the advances of married colonels and generally spreading morality wherever she goes (Colonel Lewcam and Electra Mordaunt are saved by her intervention from lives of sin). Predictably, the novel ends with the happy marriage of Sheila Hereford and Mervyn Manners.

Although the reader's attention is focused primarily on the love story at the centre of the narrative, the setting of the novel is far from insignificant. Mesopotamia lends romance and exoticism to the novel. The title situates it in the desert, suggesting to a female audience familiar with E. M. Hull's best-selling novel, *The Sheik*, a vast expanse of uncharted territory, far-removed from the modernity or civilization of Europe, and populated by dark, elegant, noble – but wild – shaikhs and

their harems.⁷²⁹ The desert represented the epitome of romance and exoticism. The threat to British control of Mesopotamia forms an important part of the tension created by Eades in this novel. Although the ‘tawny desert’ could refer to any number of desert locations, the novel is specifically located in Mesopotamia during the revolt of 1920. A preface by Brigadier-General Hughes (Director of the Inland Water Transport in Mesopotamia) attested to the novel’s verisimilitude, and reminded readers that the events in *The Tawny Desert* unfold just as ‘one of the most serious catastrophes to British arms was only very narrowly averted, the magnitude of which was little realised by the general public at the time’.⁷³⁰

A sense of unease pervades the narrative of *The Tawny Desert* from its opening sequence:

Silence! Gripping; absolute. The brooding, speechless silence that precedes the dawn. [...] Suddenly within the womb of that impenetrable darkness there was movement, soundless as the stirring of the yet unborn. A minute of time swung into the past. Then a shadow, another, even five shadows for a brief moment blurred into the surrounding obscurity. Phantoms of the night maybe – flitting shades of ill omen.⁷³¹

The Arabs of Mesopotamia are fantastical, ghoulish figures in this passage: ‘phantoms of the night [...] flitting shades of ill omen’. Stripped of any humanity, these Arabs, like those in Brereton’s novel, embody the very worst of the stereotypes that had characterised them in wartime accounts of Mesopotamia: a dangerous, unconstrained and unpredictable presence, bringing nothing but ‘ill omen’ in their wake. During the war, the ‘roaming hordes’ of Arab horsemen were a threat to a predominantly male, military population, but in this post-war period they take on a new guise as a danger to unarmed, civilian British women. Here Eades uses imagery that is suggestive of new beginnings: a dawn about to break, a birth about to take place. However, rather than signifying hope, these new beginnings are shrouded in deep apprehension. The silence that precedes the dawn is a ‘foreboding’ one, and the pregnant womb described holds nothing but darkness and shadowy, supernatural presences. What is being born in *The Tawny Desert* is not a new country, but an insurrection.

⁷²⁹ E. M. Hull, *The Sheik* [1919] (London: Virago, 1996).

⁷³⁰ R.H.W. Hughes, ‘Preface’, in Eades, *Tawny Desert*, p. v.

⁷³¹ Eades, p. 11.

Liminality is one of the central themes of *The Tawny Desert*, and serves as a metaphor for Mesopotamia at this time. Mesopotamia is neither British, nor controlled by any other authority, be it French, Turkish or Arab. The Mandates awarded by the League of Nations in 1920 were not formally approved by the League's council until July 1923.⁷³² It is, in this period, as the characters of the *Tawny Desert* assert throughout, a place nominally at peace, but actually still at war. Finally, it is a place in transition, a country not yet born. Its people, the novel suggests, stand at the crossroads between ancient and modern, east and west, between Arab nationalism and British tutelage.

The people of Mesopotamia, generally referred to simply as Arabs, are also characterised by a doubling. In British wartime accounts, this doubling was most often a mark of Arab duplicity. However, in this post-war vision of Mesopotamia, the doubling that characterised Arabs in the wartime British imagination becomes more complex, incorporating British representations of 'the Arab' well entrenched before the war as well as new wartime ideas about Mesopotamia's peoples. Sheila remarks that the Arabs:

Are too strong, too virile a race to love their conquerors; but they can hide this well under a proud and calm exterior. They are potential volcanoes; quiet on the surface, in their outward placidity. But the fires are there, within, ready to leap forth in a moment.⁷³³

Sheila's description draws on pre-war ideas of the Arabs as a proud, 'virile' race of warriors. This romantic vision of the Bedouin Arabs, originating in the writing of men like Sir Richard Burton, was rarely applied to Mesopotamia's Arab population during the war. It is perhaps the romantic nature of Eades's narrative that leads her to include it here. Sheila's description also reflects the political situation in Mesopotamia in 1920; despite appearances to the contrary, Mesopotamia – here represented by its inhabitants – is a volcano about to erupt. References to burning fires within, with an innate ability to 'leap forth in a moment', evoke images of magical shape-shifting creatures from the tales of *A Thousand and One Nights* but they also conjure a familiar vision of the Arab as over-sexed, and reaffirm the fickle, ever-changing nature of Arab loyalties depicted in British accounts during the war.

⁷³² Peter Mansfield, *A History of the Middle East*, 2nd edn (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 196.

⁷³³ Eades, p. 32.

Shaikh Mesjed el Mansuric embodies the multi-faceted nature of Arabs hinted at above. Exiled to Bombay during the war for his anti-British behaviour, he now embodies both British tastes and Arab values. Among his own 'wild' people, Mansuric is an imposing presence,⁷³⁴ his 'vener of the West' replaced by a 'calm and dignified' countenance and a 'commanding personality completely dominating that wild and fierce-looking horde of ruffians' who adored him as their 'prince'.⁷³⁵ The 'vener of West', however, seems to run a little deeper than is first suggested. Mansuric is a fan of the Nasiriyah races, and:

Alone with these British people whose friendship he believed in and valued, Mansuric was a charming companion. His reserve was let in the other room with his *aba*, and the conversation never flagged. He relished a friendly glass of wine when secure from the prying and condemnatory eye of his own people. With his guard absent he was free to enjoy himself.⁷³⁶

Mansuric serves several important functions in Eades's narrative. As Mathew Paris has argued in relation to boys' adventure stories during the war, authors felt it necessary to include 'one noble native who becomes a loyal follower of the Allies' in order to reflect the descriptions of the heroic Arabs who had risen in support of the Allies during the war.⁷³⁷ Here, Mansuric falls into Paris's definition: he is loyal to the British and wishes to see them continue to rule in Mesopotamia. Moreover, Mansuric is no ordinary Arab; he is a noble shaikh, depicted as aristocratic in his manners and behaviour. As Toby Dodge has shown, the British authorities put much faith in men like him, believing them to be 'untainted by modernity': decent and loyal and the best leaders and representatives of their own peoples, they became both the representatives of their tribe and the collectors of the British revenue.⁷³⁸ Nevertheless, the stark contrast between Mansuric and his people is telling. Mansuric has only been converted to these sophisticated tastes by British imprisonment, before which he himself was a rogue not dissimilar to the 'fierce-looking horde of ruffians' whom he ruled.⁷³⁹ In Eades's novel, the vast majority of Arabs conform to this wartime stereotype of the Arab. The continued use of the word 'horde' reflects its prevalence in

⁷³⁴ Eades, p. 72.

⁷³⁵ Eades, p. 101

⁷³⁶ Eades, p. 300

⁷³⁷ Michael Paris, *Over the Top: The Great War and Juvenile Literature in Britain* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004), p. 93.

⁷³⁸ Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, pp. 71- 95.

⁷³⁹ Eades, p. 101.

wartime literature and letters. It evokes an image of a primitive, barely control violence moving at will through Mesopotamia.

In much the same way as a stark distinction is drawn between Mansuric and his people, the novel also distinguishes between male and female Arab views on Britain and on British involvement in post-war Mesopotamia. The presence of British women and their centrality to the plot brings into clearer focus the role of Mesopotamian women. Though Mesopotamian women featured in many wartime accounts, in Eades's novel they take on a greater significance. While the men of Mesopotamia vacillate in their loyalties and are characterised by fickleness and unpredictability, the women, the novel suggests, reveal the true hatred of British rule felt by Mesopotamians. It is Sheila Hereford who identifies Mesopotamian women's hatred for Britons. The narrator describes Sheila's impressions of the people of Mesopotamia. While the Arabs (here signifying only Arab men, just as they did in Louisa Jebb's travelogue) 'fascinated her even while they repelled her', the Arab women frightened Sheila:⁷⁴⁰

But the women, the Arab women in their rich-hued draperies and jangling bangles, had affected her to a peculiar degree. She had wondered what lay hidden in the depths of their dark, flashing eyes, black as sloes; then, as their sinister glances had bored into hers, she had experienced a sudden recoil. It was as if a veil had been withdrawn, revealing to the white girl passions crude and elemental, savagery cruel and terrible.⁷⁴¹

Sheila's penetrating gaze 'unveils' both the Arab woman and her true feelings towards Britain. The imagery used is Manichean: the Arab woman's exoticism (symbolised by her veil and the passions she reveals to Sheila) is dark – her eyes 'black as sloes'. Words such as 'crude', 'elemental' and 'savage' suggest she is racially backward, while the attendant 'cruel and terrible' passions conveyed in the 'sinister gaze' are in stark contrast to Sheila Hereford's whiteness, invoked to suggest innocence but also a higher, purer racial identity. *The Tawny Desert* can be read as a 'woman's-eye-view' of the situation in Mesopotamia in the summer of 1920. In the novel, women of both races represent the true characteristics of their respective race; they are depicted as representatives figures: their virtues and flaws reflecting those of their peoples.

⁷⁴⁰ Eades, p. 31

⁷⁴¹ Eades, p. 32

Sheila Hereford is the embodiment of the virtues of British women: she is fair (in both senses of the word), brave, loyal, and her Christian morals are impeccable. Indeed, Sheila, opposed from the beginning of the novel to the 'exotic' and likened in the same description to an 'English garden', can be said symbolise Britain in the novel.⁷⁴² When an Arab mistreats his horse at the races, it is Sheila, representing a British love of animals, who, regardless of any danger to herself, runs onto the track to prevent him from whipping the animal. Sheila does not simply represent the virtues every good, moral Englishwoman should have, but particularly one who is a representative of her sex and country in a foreign land.

At several points during the novel, the reader's attention is drawn to the fact of Sheila's 'whiteness'. When Electra suggests to Mervyn that she did not associate with Sheila because of her inappropriate relationship with a certain colonel while a nurse in Bombay, Mervyn is infuriated by 'her beastly attack on the *flaming whiteness of Sheila*'.⁷⁴³ This is one of several occasions where Sheila is defined by her 'whiteness', signifying, as it does in this instance, both her race and her sexual and moral purity 'flaming' bright. In a later passage, Eades situates this specifically within the colonial setting. Sheila is mortified when she realises that Mervyn had been led to believe that it was she, and not Electra, who had had an affair with Colonel Lewcam in Bombay. Heart-broken and dismayed by his low opinion of her, Sheila begins her walk home through the streets of Amarah:

Approaching was a group of Arabs. They were staring with curious eyes at this English girl, so terribly white, and as one distraught.

Instantly, with that alien gaze upon her, the strange instinct of British pride and reserve fell upon her as a mantle. With head held high, straight as a sapling, so she went. [...] Her world might crash about her ears, but it behoved her present a calm front and smiling face. The Arabs had brought that fact home to her. But in her heart was a cold despair like unto death.⁷⁴⁴

Once again, Eades calls attention to Sheila's whiteness – here indicating her perturbed mental state, but also drawing attention to her racial difference from the Arabs whose 'alien gaze' surrounds her. Sheila's whiteness draws the attention of the Arab men, but it is also her whiteness, in a racial sense, that causes her to recall that she is a representative of her country and her race, and that, as such, she could not under any

⁷⁴² Eades, p. 18

⁷⁴³ Eades, p. 59. My emphasis.

⁷⁴⁴ Eades, p. 174.

circumstances present anything but an entirely composed and dignified countenance before the 'alien gaze'.

The liminality or hybridity that runs right through *The Tawny Desert* is also to be found in the type of society being formed in Mesopotamia's newly established British communities. The community starting to take root in Mesopotamia's towns is reminiscent of the British communities in India under the Raj. The characters use Indian shorthand phrases: guests are invited to take 'tiffin' (lunch),⁷⁴⁵ and servants are asked to serve 'chota hazri' (breakfast or morning tea).⁷⁴⁶ The very presence of Indian troops and servants, and the linguistic shorthand that they enable, evokes an atmosphere akin to that of British India.

However, Eades is also careful to distinguish this community from those of India, and to locate it specifically in Mesopotamia. She refers readers briefly to what used to be the defining attributes of the region: the desert, the biblical and iconic Tigris and Euphrates, the Garden of Eden, Babylon, the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia and Baghdad, and the *Arabian Nights* stories associated with it. In addition to the Indian servants, the recently arrived wives of officers employ Arab servants until the political situation makes their employment untenable. Gesturing towards more recent symbols of Mesopotamia in the post-war British imagination, Eades also emphasises Mesopotamia as the novel's location through constant references to the war and its aftermath: Mervin is attacked not on any bridge, but on the MacMunn Bridge, 'named after General MacMunn' who served in Mesopotamia during the War and commanded the forces in Mesopotamia after the Armistice between May 1919 and January 1920.⁷⁴⁷ Through these references, a picture is painted of a new British expatriate community: one that has not yet settled in its new home, but whose standards and habits were already guided by the conventions of colonial life as defined elsewhere in the British Empire.

While the nature of British communities themselves reflected the uncertainty that characterised Mesopotamia at this time, the instability of the region is highlighted by the fact that, as in Brereton's novel, Mesopotamia was a place where conflict continued to escalate despite its nominal peace. Eades's narrator and

⁷⁴⁵ Eades, p. 217.

⁷⁴⁶ Eades, p. 214.

⁷⁴⁷ Eades, p. 167.

protagonists hint regularly that, while Britons in Mesopotamia had rejoiced in the cessation of hostilities and felt safe enough to begin to form an expatriate community that included their wives and children, all was not as stable as it should have been in Mesopotamia in 1920. On the surface, the British community is depicted as extremely settled: the reader follows the action at the Nasiriyah races and ‘the club’ at Amarah, where a small but flourishing community all know and socialise with one another. Even the bazaars seem to have tailored their ways to suit the tastes of English ladies who now patronise them. But Eades hints throughout that this seemingly secure community is really in serious danger.

Just as the twists and turns of Sheila and Mervyn’s romance reach their climax, the sense of foreboding in Mesopotamia turns to actual violence, and the British community begins to worry. In the domestic setting of the novel, this manifests itself in the firing of Arab servants, who are no longer trusted not to turn on their mistresses, and in the circumscription of the movements of the women of the community. Young Burney tells Sheila that her brother does not want her to go to the Bazaar unaccompanied: “‘He’s not feeling too sure of these Arabs, you know.’”⁷⁴⁸ The British women on whom the novel focuses receive news of the growing violence through the papers or, in a censored form, from their husbands or brothers.

Despite fears for their safety, British stoicism prevails. Eades describes how ‘[while] the rising did not extend to Amara, the atmosphere was electric, pregnant with a seething unrest. For the little handful of Britishers life went on, to outward seeming, much as usual’.⁷⁴⁹ Once again, Eades uses the image of a pregnancy to allude to the coming violence. Nevertheless, the ‘British pluck’ the narrator admiringly notes in these remarks, demonstrated by Sheila in her encounter with the Arabs earlier in the novel and by Mervyn when he is wrongly accused, is the same as that of the scouts in Brereton’s novel. Central to both texts is a British resilience and determination to overcome the troubles of Empire-making. It is this stoicism that both novels celebrate. Even *The Times* grudgingly ‘admire[d] the fortitude and devotion of these women’ who had travelled across the world to establish families and a British community in what the paper described as ‘one of the most trying climates in the world’.⁷⁵⁰ These texts

⁷⁴⁸ Eades, *The Tawny Desert*, p. 267.

⁷⁴⁹ Eades, *The Tawny Desert*, p. 205.

⁷⁵⁰ ‘British Policy in Mesopotamia’, *The Times*, 24 August 1920, p. 11.

suggest that while British politicians might have been warning of the dire consequences of over-extending Britain's responsibilities in the Middle East, for some Britons at least, the appetite for imperial growth remained strong.

Conclusions

In these novels, the already sinister wartime vision of the Arabs as a predatory race that preyed on the defenceless – prisoners in their care, wounded on the battlefield, or even the bodies of the dead – takes its most threatening and amoral form as British women or children, not British servicemen, become the target of Arab violence. Pre-war ideas of Mesopotamia had not disappeared in representations of Mesopotamia in the years 1918-1921, but they had certainly receded to the background. In these years, as the 'land between the rivers' ceased to be defined in Britain by a name rooted in classical antiquity, Mesopotamia, its people also acquired a new identity in British accounts, one with its roots in the most modern of conflicts. Although pre-war ideas about Mesopotamia were used to ground the reader, it is the war-time vision of Mesopotamia that is predominant: one in which its people are violent and untrustworthy, and their allegiance can never be trusted for very long. The decisions Britain made about its relationship with Mesopotamia in the years 1918-1921 would shape the future state of Iraq, but they also irrevocably changed Britain's perceptions of, and relationship with, Mesopotamia itself. It is beyond the purview of this thesis to link these post-war representations of Mesopotamia to emerging British policy at this time. It seems relevant, nevertheless, that a British policy of indiscriminate communal punishment by air bombardment should emerge in the very years that the identity of Mesopotamia's inhabitants became defined as inhumane.

Conclusion

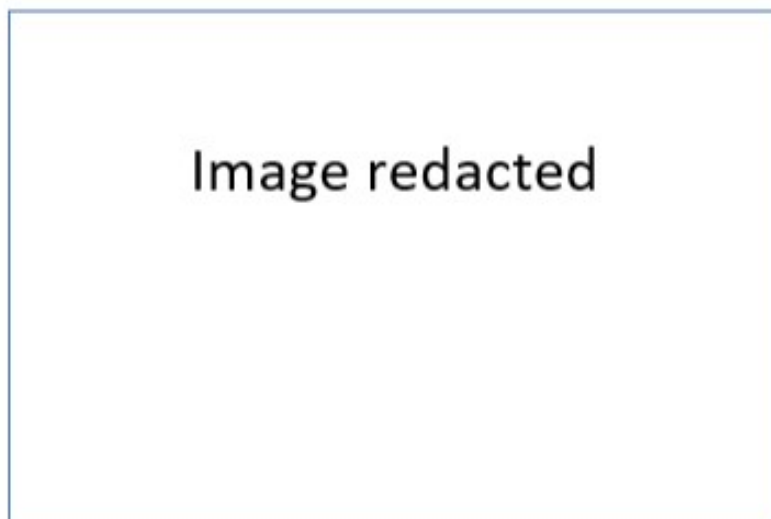


Figure 7. Richard C. Carline, Siege of Kut-el-Amara Seen From the Air, 1919. British Maurice-Farman Aeroplane Approaching, Attacked by Enemy Fokker, (1919), Imperial War Museum.

The image reproduced above is a painting by Richard Carline. He and his brother, Sydney, were sent to Mesopotamia as official war artists during the war. Many of their paintings, like this one, represent Mesopotamia from the air – a modern vision of a region that was soon to lose its antiquated name. I have argued that the First World War transformed British perceptions of Mesopotamia. Carline's painting brings together many of the attributes that had come to define the region by the end of the war. Although the painting is of a Mesopotamian town, its subject is actually the British war effort: not Kut al-Amara itself, but the siege of Kut. As I have shown, the siege of Kut came to define the formerly anonymous Mesopotamian town for Britons: it does so here, as it did in so many British accounts of the campaign. The very choice of the siege of Kut as the subject for Carline's painting reaffirms its place as one of the defining events of the Mesopotamian campaign in Britain.

Carline offers the viewer an aerial 'snapshot' of both the landscape and, crucially, an attacking German Fokker. We can also see the wing of the plane in which we imagine the artist sketching the scene. The presence of both aeroplanes places the viewer in the middle of a battle, reinforcing the wartime setting of Carline's painting, but also the modern nature of the warfare taking place in the skies of a place associated in Britain with the battles of ancient kings. The land that could be neither accurately mapped nor effectively navigated by British servicemen is here presented in a format reminiscent of the aerial maps that transformed the latter half of the Mesopotamian campaign. The modernity of the aerial view is palpable; in a real sense as well as a metaphorical one, Mesopotamia's skies had ceased to be filled with flying carpets in the British imagination. The skies of a region that would soon become a training ground for the youngest of the British armed forces, the Royal Air Force, are here aptly filled with a far more modern flying machine.

This thesis charts changing British perceptions of Mesopotamia between the years 1907 and 1921. It argues that the First World War can be seen as a turning point in the way Mesopotamia was perceived and represented in Britain. I argue that in the years preceding the war, Mesopotamia took on new significance in Britain as a site of Anglo-German imperial rivalry and as a potential source of oil. The travelogues of those British travellers whose accounts I examine suggest that they struggled to reconcile their impressions of Mesopotamia as a backward oriental despotism with the achievements of its past civilizations. In order to deal with this incongruence, they appropriated what they saw as laudable in Mesopotamia's history as the precursor of their own, western civilization, and dismissed contemporary Mesopotamian culture as afflicted by the flaws that they believed typified 'the Orient'.

This project suggests that scientific theories of race and civilization were central to the ways in which British servicemen understood Mesopotamia's peoples and their Indian colleagues in the first two years of the war. In a region where they felt a greater fear of the local population than of their Ottoman adversaries, these discourses allowed British men and women working under circumstances of extreme pressure, with limited resources, to feel a degree of control. I argue that fears about 'British Prestige in the East' were an important motivation for the despatch of IEF D. These anxieties – made clear in the archives of the Mesopotamia Commission but also

in contemporary political debates – brought to the fore apprehensions about Britain's existing empire.

In the final two years of the war, a better-funded and expanded force was able to occupy northern Mesopotamia. In order to do so, British commanders built an infrastructure that transformed the region. In modernising Mesopotamia, this project asserts, they fulfilled the wishes of pre-war travellers, and de-mystified an area resented by British servicemen and women for its alienating opacity. Finally, the years between the Armistice and the coronation of Faisal in August 1921 established a new conception of Mesopotamia in Britain. The Arab Rebellion of 1920 confirmed wartime British perceptions of Mesopotamia as a place populated by fickle, lawless hordes with no loyalty or honour. In short, the First World War removed Mesopotamia from the myth, fable and antiquity that had characterized 'the land between the rivers' in the British imagination, and located it definitively within the realm of early-twentieth-century politics.

The limitations of time and space have left several questions to be taken up by future research. More remains to be said about what events in the Middle East tell us about Britain's changing relationship with India in these years. Briton Cooper Busch, Toby Dodge, Peter Sluglett and Priya Satia have examined how British India influenced the creation of the Iraqi state; but how did the British Raj influence the way in which the British community in Mesopotamia/Iraq saw the region and interacted with it? How, in other words, did experiences elsewhere in the empire influence the way Britons perceived the new colonies of the early-twentieth century, such as Iraq? The work of Santanu Das, Dewitt Ellinwood and Satyendra Pradhan, and David Omissi has done, and continues to do, much to bring the long-silent voices of Indian servicemen into our understanding of the First World War.⁷⁵¹ Recently, Michèle Barrett's work on the failings of the Imperial War Graves Commission to live up to its commitment to commemorate those who gave their lives in the service of Britain without distinction 'on account of military or civil rank, race or creed' has begun exploring how Imperial troops were perceived and treated by Britain in the aftermath

⁷⁵¹ Santanu Das, ed., *Race, Empire and the First World War* (forthcoming Cambridge University Press, 2010); Dewitt C., Ellinwood and S. D. Pradhan, *India and World War One* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1978); David Omissi, ed. *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914-18* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999).

of the war.⁷⁵² More work remains to be done, however, on the perception of these servicemen in Britain during the war. Finally, an analysis of British perceptions of the nascent Iraqi state during the years of the British Mandate remains a fruitful avenue for future research.

In the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, it seems that we in Britain are once again taking an interest not in Iraq, but in Mesopotamia. When Mesopotamia became a battlefield of the First World War, it ceased to be an abstract concept and became an everyday reality for Britons; it seems that this most recent British and American military occupation of Iraq is reviving an interest in an older, more distant vision of 'the land between the rivers'. In 2003, the British Museum saw a rise in the number of visitors to its impressive Mesopotamian collections. In an article in *The Times* in March that year, John Curtis, keeper of the Department of the Ancient Near East, told the paper that 'with Iraq being so much in the news, people are wanting to find out something about it.'⁷⁵³ In the world of business, too, it seems that it pays to remember Iraq's ancient history: when in 2005 three British businessmen set up a petroleum company to work on the oilfields of Iraq, they called it the Mesopotamia Petroleum Company. The British Museum's recent exhibition, *Babylon: Myth and Reality*, is a testament to the continuing interest of the British public in the ancient history of Iraq. Barry Unsworth's 2009 novel *Land of Marvels* is set in Mesopotamia just before the outbreak of the First World War. In Unsworth's novel, Mesopotamia is defined by its ancient history and its status as a site of Anglo-German rivalry in relation to the Baghdad railway and as a site of global rivalry for its valuable oil reserves.⁷⁵⁴

The occupation of Iraq in 2003 has revived British interest not just in modern-day Iraq, but in the land of the Assyrian, Babylonian, Akkadian and Sumerian kingdoms known in Britain for centuries as Mesopotamia. As Hollywood gears up for a new film adaptation of the *Arabian Nights* stories, perhaps a new generation is beginning to think of Baghdad not just in terms of suicide bombs, dictators and

⁷⁵² See for example: Michèle Barrett, 'Subalterns At War: First World War Colonial Forces and the Politics of the Imperial War Graves Commission', *Interventions*, 9.3 (2007), 451-474; Michèle Barrett, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' *History Workshop Journal*, 58 (2004), 359-359.

⁷⁵³ Dalya Alberge, 'War and its Aftermath Threaten Iraqi Treasures', *Times Online* <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/court_and_social/article1123369.ece> [accessed 6 Nov 2009].

⁷⁵⁴ Barry Unsworth, *Land of Marvels* (Bath: Paragon, 2009).

sectarian violence, but as the place where once there ruled a caliph called Harun al-Rashid, who became famous in the west not only as the ruler of one of the most powerful and sophisticated civilizations of its day, but also for his adventures in Scheherazade's stories of a thousand and one nights.⁷⁵⁵

⁷⁵⁵ Ben Child, 'Arabian Nights Set for Hollywood Makeover', *The Guardian* <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/nov/04/arabian-nights-hollywood-makeover>> [accessed 4 January 2010]

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