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MEMORIES OF ARABIA AND EMPIRE

an oral history of the British in Aden

Introduction

When Britain withdrew from Aden – somewhat ignominiously – in 1967, its departure seemed to mark the end of an era. The British had ruled Aden, at the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, for 128 years and many felt they had overstayed their welcome. There was a sense that a new period of enlightenment was well underway: a Labour government had come to power in 1964; London was “swinging”; many colonized peoples around the world were asserting their right to freedom and self-determination, as foreshadowed by a Conservative Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, in his famous “Winds of Change” speech. Former colonial masters were moving away from the unrestrained expansionist policies of the 19th and early 20th centuries, towards an altogether more respectful relationship with the rest of the world. Rather than ruling India, young British people now travelled there overland in order to “discover themselves”.

Aden in 1967 represented a turning point in history and, in this space between the past and the future, was located a disparate group of individuals. Part of a world that was rapidly changing, the British in Aden had for the most part tried to do the best they could. As business people, civil servants, soldiers or government officials, one could argue they symbolized the old order, arriving almost too late to enjoy the fruits of empire. While some had severe misgivings, many of these people neither saw themselves as dinosaurs nor doubted the rightness of the British colonial project. For many Yemenis, on the other hand, November 1967 is remembered as the dawn of a new era of freedom.

To the general public in Britain today, if they think about it at all, Aden used to be a remote outpost of the British Empire, a vaguely familiar name they had heard on radio news programmes, now part of a state in which innocent tourists are murdered. But Aden – together with many other, intriguing-sounding but largely unknown places that used to make up Britain’s sprawling empire – is an important piece in the jigsaw puzzle, the mosaic that is modern multi-cultural Britain. Out of such obscure spots emerged what we regard today as the British identity. For the people of Yemen, too, their relationship with Britain has left an indelible mark on their national consciousness. Almost 35 years after Britain’s retreat from Aden, it is fascinating and also fruitful to look back at this period, as a way of better understanding Britain’s long association with the Arab world, in terms of mutual impacts and current relations between Yemen and Britain.

In this article, I propose to look at the final years of the British colonial period in Aden through the eyes of some of the people who were there, both British and Yemeni. By considering their experiences in terms of power and powerlessness, I hope to present a radically different perspective on this relatively little known episode of history. I will argue that changing political priorities in Britain, together with growing agitation for national liberation among the colonized peoples of the world (Arab nationalism in this case), forced a British withdrawal from Aden that was neither properly planned nor particularly dignified.

Background

*“For a thousand years or more, Aden had essentially belonged to the wealthy merchants of the world, be they South Yemeni or foreign, while the people of its hinterland watched with jealous and poverty-stricken eyes from beyond its gates”.*¹

The southern Yemeni city of Aden has, periodically throughout its history, alternated from being a sleepy fishing village to serving as a port of considerable commercial significance, acting as it did, on occasion, “as a rendezvous for ships bound from India to the Red Sea and, at the same time, enjoying an active local trade with the Persian Gulf and the coast of East Africa”.² Although it declined as a result of the discovery of the Cape route to India, it assumed strategic importance for Britain in 1798, following the Napoleonic campaign in Egypt.

In the 19th century, Aden became part of the British Empire; a free port since 1853, it was made a British Crown Colony in 1937. As one of the world’s busiest ports in the 1950s, “Aden attracted significant investments: British Petroleum spent \$45,000 on a refinery at Little Aden, and over \$1,000,000 was invested in power, water, and telephone systems. Migrants poured in: 2,000 Arabs worked at the port, and thousands of others found jobs in and around the shipyards”.³ Beyond cosmopolitan Aden was the hinterland of “the protectorates”, protected but not administered by the British through a series of treaties negotiated with the individual rulers. The Western Aden Protectorate (WAP), situated nearer to Aden, comprised a number of sultanates, emirates, sheikhdoms and one “republic”, whilst the more distant Eastern Aden Protectorate (EAP) consisted of

¹ Gavin, R J, *Aden Under British Rule: 1839-1967*, London: C Hurst & Company, first impression 1975, second impression 1996, p.350.

² *The Middle East and North Africa*, London: Europa Publications, 1995, p.949.

the two relatively sophisticated Kathiri and Qa'iti (with its capital at Mukalla) sultanates, the Wahidi Sultanate and the wild, primitive and totally unadministered Mahra.

By the middle of the 20th century, in line with colonized areas elsewhere in the world, there was growing local pressure for national independence. In response to British prompting, a group of rulers suggested to the British government in 1958 “the idea of a union to which all of South Arabia could ultimately adhere. It would be an Arab state with its constitution in Arabic, although the state would be in close association with Britain”.⁴ The outcome was a treaty, signed in February 1959 by the Governor of Aden, Sir William Luce, and the rulers of six of the states of the Western Aden Protectorate, to create the Federation of South Arabian Emirates.⁵ This was subsequently enlarged and renamed the Federation of South Arabia, incorporating most states in WAP and one in EAP. In September 1962, Aden State joined the Federation as a result of considerable arm twisting by the British government and in the face of strong local nationalist opposition.

By the early 1960s, the British colonial authorities in Aden were encountering fierce opposition to their rule, not only locally but throughout the Arab world, orchestrated by President Nasir of Egypt. A number of armed resistance organizations emerged in 1963 and 1964, most notably the National Liberation Front (NLF) and the Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen (FLOSY), which was formed by the merger of several smaller parties in 1965. Attacks were carried out against British personnel and their families and against Arab leaders of the federal government and their

³ Carapico, Sheila, *Civil society in Yemen: The political economy of activism in modern Arabia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.24.

⁴ Bidwell, Robin, *The Two Yemens*, Harlow: Longman Group, and Boulder: Westview Press, 1983, p.131.

⁵ Bidwell, *The Two Yemens*, p131.

officials. Following a constitutional conference in London in June 1964, the British government agreed that the Federation of South Arabia, including Aden, would gain its independence no later than 1968. Abruptly, in February 1966, London declared “that Aden was not vital after all”.⁶ The base was to be abandoned and British protection would not be afforded to any newly independent state.

In the latter part of 1967, “the authority of the sultans crumbled rapidly before the advancing tide of nationalism”.⁷ British troops began to be evacuated from Aden in August 1967. On 27 November, the day of the final British withdrawal, the NLF declared the establishment of the People’s Republic of Southern Yemen, which became the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) with the promulgation of a new constitution in November 1970. The PDRY, in striking contrast to the Yemen Arab Republic in the north, represented “the most radical embodiment of revolutionary transformationist ideology and practice in the Arab world”.⁸ Its “practice” included acts of repression on a scale never contemplated by the colonial authorities as potential rivals were destroyed, vestiges of the British administration eradicated and erstwhile supporters of the old regime hunted down and murdered.

Memories of empire

The circumstances of the abrupt British departure from Aden did not permit an orderly handover to an indigenous successor regime. Indeed, the end of the British colonial period in Aden has been cited as an example of incomplete de-colonization. Rather than

⁶ Dresch, Paul, *A History of Modern Yemen*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.102.

⁷ *The Middle East and North Africa*, p.952.

⁸ Hudson, Michael, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977, p.352.

handing over to the new government, Britain's departure resulted in chaos and violence. The NLF, mindful of maintaining the purity of its nationalist struggle, had refused to talk with the departing colonial administration, preferring to be seen to be driving it out, rather than negotiating a withdrawal. For the people of Aden and the Protectorates, the period leading up to the British withdrawal was a time of great change. While the majority regarded independence as inevitable and, on the whole, desirable, some would have preferred a different transition of authority. Almost everyone involved in this project on the Yemeni side was critical of the abrupt and disorganized nature of the British departure. Yemeni commentators who remember that time suggest that the British "left too hurriedly", they "did not put their house in order"; many in Aden "felt let down" by the British, they regret that Britain "did not assist them after liberation". What more could Britain have done? Was it the case, as some Yemenis claim, that the British government did not have a policy and was concerned only for its own interests? How did the ideal of Arab nationalism and an independent south Yemen fit in with the violent nature of the final struggle against British rule? Was there any nostalgia for the retreating British governing system? How did individuals experience the transition of power and what were their hopes for the future?

For the many British people who were there in the final days, living and working in Aden and the Protectorates, it must have been difficult too. Having enjoyed what many describe as a "wonderful" life, they suddenly found themselves plunged into terror and uncertainty. How did they cope with the contradiction between a life of comfort and the new dangers that faced themselves and their families? Did they understand why the nationalist uprising took place? Did they have any sympathy or even understanding for

local aspirations? In what ways were they forced to modify their day to day lives? How did they feel about witnessing the end of empire? Many speak about that period with a degree of stoicism, of “carrying on as normal”; others evacuated their families; a few barely noticed the mayhem erupting around them.

Oral history as a methodology

In 1999, I embarked on an oral history project of the British colonial presence in Aden, with two principal objectives: the first was to provide an opportunity for a cross section of individuals, British and Yemeni, to put on record their own experiences of and responses to some of the events that took place in the closing years of the British colonial period; and the other was to make these recordings available as a resource for future research, to create an archive. The project began as something of a personal journey, to fill in some of the gaps in my own understanding of the history of the place and its people. Having visited Aden, I was curious about this episode at the end of British colonial history and I was also keen “to extend what we mean by history-writing”.⁹

Most of the British recordings were collected in 2000 and the Yemeni ones in 2003. They represent a rich mix of talents and experiences, from military personnel, political officers and active participants in the national liberation struggle to people involved in commerce and the public sector and local people who worked for the British administration. The quest for narrators has taken me all over Britain and to Sana’a and Aden in Yemen. My experiences have caused me to think about the wider significance of oral history as a method of gathering research data, and also about how the material collected during the course of this project could be used.

The oral history technique, through which individuals are invited to speak about their lives without excessive restriction, is popular with many historians today. One reason for this is social, in the sense that oral history is an appropriate method “to recover neglected or silenced accounts of past experience, and as a way of challenging dominant histories”.¹⁰ Popular memory has been defined “first as an *object of study* but, second, as a *dimension of political practice*”.¹¹

In her important oral history-based research project on the Palestinian refugee camp of Chatila in Lebanon, Rosemary Sayigh has written of the risks and benefits of the oral history method. It is, she says, “a valuable tool for recording popular struggles”,¹² with the “potential for revealing social struggles contained within the history of nation-states or national liberation movements”.¹³ However, as she also notes, people’s memories “cannot but be affected by certain factors, which researchers and readers need to take into account...(for example) the effects of class, political affiliation, age or gender on what they say...(and also) the effect on speech and memory of the situation at the time of the recording, with ‘situation’ including overall and local political conditions, mood, the particular moment and place of recording, and the researcher’s identity and relationship with the history-givers”.¹⁴

Some researchers, such as Sayigh, argue that the use of oral history has radical implications for the study of history as a whole. As Paul Thompson says, “by

⁹ Popular Memory Group, “Popular memory”, p.75.

¹⁰ Perks and Thomson, editor, “Advocacy and empowerment: introduction”, in *The Oral History Reader*, p.183.

¹¹ Popular Memory Group, “Popular memory: Theory, politics, method”, in Perks, Robert, and Thomson, Alistair, editors, *The oral history reader*, London & New York: Routledge: 1998, p.75.

¹² Sayigh, Rosemary, *Too Many Enemies: The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon*, London & New Jersey: Zed Book, 1994, p.4.

¹³ Sayigh, *Too Many Enemies*, p.5.

¹⁴ Sayigh, *Too Many Enemies*, p.6.

introducing new evidence from the underside, by shifting the focus and opening new areas of inquiry, by challenging some of the assumptions and accepted judgements of historians, by bringing recognition to substantial groups of people who had been ignored, a cumulative process of transformation is set in motion”.¹⁵ He means that the history of marginalized and hitherto disregarded sectors of society can be revealed and facts that have been suppressed by the general desire to simplify history can be studied. Other scholars “believe that injustices can be righted when ‘people tell their stories’”.¹⁶

The Aden oral history project, although it does not entirely fall into the category of giving a voice to the oppressed, as many of the people taking part – at least on the British side – are neither powerless nor underprivileged, allows some individuals who would not normally have the opportunity to do so, to “tell their stories” as an act of personal liberation. Although we can read the formal accounts of those who held power – and therefore controlled what successive generations would be told – we do not usually have access either to the versions of the colonized or to the authentic voice of day-to-day experience of the various layers of British involved in the colonial project; while some of them held positions of relative power, others had very little say in what went on. In the case of the Yemeni narrators, while some worked with the British, others were waging a violent liberation struggle against British rule, so they too represent many vantage points. By hearing their varied stories, one begins to get some idea of the complex reality of this period and the dynamics that governed the interaction of the various elements of colonial society.

¹⁵ Thompson, Paul, “The voice of the past: oral history”, in Perks and Thomson, editors, *The oral history reader*, p.26.

¹⁶ Reinharz, Shulamit, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p.136.

The process of story telling or self-narrative can be an enthralling one, allowing the unexpected to emerge and, in the process, confirming an individual's sense of identity. Autobiographical revelation gives the person a degree of control over the procedure. One begins with some notion of the structural form in which the encounter might unfold, but it is open to the flow of conversation and disclosure. This in itself can be liberating.

It is necessary, I believe, to question the purpose of this oral history project: what is the point of doing it and who is it for? Ken Howarth suggests that oral history may be able to be used as a tool in the process of peace making, healing or rehabilitation in a former war zone.¹⁷ It is possible that, by hearing what “the other side” felt or why they did something during a conflict, former adversaries may be better able to develop more constructive relationships. Oppressed communities, as Howarth notes, “have used oral history to record their unwritten feelings”.¹⁸ One would imagine that this would particularly be the case for some of the Yemeni narrators taking part in the project, who may wish to recall certain incidents but do not, under normal circumstances, have the opportunity to do so.

There must be a balance between events and meanings. Subjectivity, as Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli remarks, “is as much the business of history as are the more visible ‘facts’. What informants believe is indeed a historical *fact* (that is, the fact that they believe it), as much as what really happened”.¹⁹ Each person describes events according to his or her perspective. There is no single “truth” but, rather, “the truth of

¹⁷ Howarth, Ken, *Oral History*, Stroud, Glos: Sutton Publishing, 1998, p.86.

¹⁸ Howarth, *Oral History*, p.86.

¹⁹ Portelli, Alessandro, “What makes oral history different”, in Perks and Thomson, editor, *The oral history reader*, p.67.

past events as seen by the people, a truth that is often not represented in official literature and records”.²⁰

By listening to the often very diverse points of view and personal experiences of British and Yemeni narrators, each of whom is telling their own “truth”, one has the opportunity of arriving at a much more richly textured version of history than the official, written sources are capable of yielding. It is not so much to do with the reliability of individual narrators or how good their memories are, but rather gives weight to a unique experience. But one needs to be aware of the sensitivities involved.

Potential pitfalls

The decision to use oral history as a method of gathering information raises a number of questions. First of all, we need to ask how the project enhances our understanding of history and how it might facilitate political progress, in the sense that it permits us to view the period in question in a fresh light. One should bear in mind that political ideology also shapes the construction of memory.²¹ Oral history, as Rosemary Sayigh observes, “takes its place in the frame of political action rather than academic work, yet its methods and interpretations need to be subjected to...scrutiny. People’s memories of the past – recent or distant – cannot but be affected by certain factors, which researchers and readers need to take into account”.²² Whether the narrator’s experiences were largely positive or negative will influence, first, their willingness to speak about their memories; and, second, the shape of the encounter. Sometimes, if an individual has undergone a

²⁰ Howarth, *Oral History*, p.127.

²¹ Sangster, Joan, “Telling our stories: Feminist debates and the use of oral history”, in Perks and Thomson, editors, *The oral history reader*, p.89.

particularly traumatic experience, they may find the relief of having someone else to tell about it, even if the other person is a virtual stranger, unleashes a flood of memory. On the other hand, the pain of recollection may inhibit the narrator's flow.

Secondly, the researcher must acknowledge his or her "influence on the shape of the interview".²³ Although I have tried to keep my own involvement in the narratives to a minimum, my presence, as well as the choices I make about what to include and what to omit, is bound to have an effect on the outcome. Any interviewing process, as Ellen Fleischmann notes, "involves multiple roles and several layers of perception. Each person, interviewer and narrator, makes choices in terms of communication, understanding and presentation resulting in the production of different kinds of information".²⁴ There is, she believes, "an inherent tension in these multiple roles".²⁵

Both "interpreters and narrators approach the process of creating a personal narrative with their own agendas. These, too, affect the shape and focus of the text".²⁶ The dynamics of the "relationship" between narrator and interpreter will influence not only the shape of the narrative but also the quality and scope of disclosure and the value of the final product to both parties. For one party, the unfolding of the narrative represents the revelation of sometimes painful memories, while for the other it is the more passive process of listening or bearing witness. There are also issues of guilt and safety. For the majority of British people I have spoken to, the process of narrating their

²² Sayigh, Rosemary, *Too Many Enemies: The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon*, London & New Jersey: Zed Books, 1994, p.6.

²³ Sangster, "Telling our stories", p.92.

²⁴ Fleischmann, Ellen, "Crossing the Boundaries of History: Exploring Oral History in Researching Palestinian Women in the Mandate Period", *Women's History Review* 5, no 3 (October 1996), p.361.

²⁵ Fleischmann, "Crossing the Boundaries of History", p.361.

²⁶ Personal Narratives Group, "Whose Voice?" in Personal Narratives Group, editors, *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989, p.202.

stories has been, on the whole, a happy one. Most have relatively benevolent memories of their time in Aden. They have no reason to fear any repercussions stemming from what they say to me.

The situation of Yemeni history-givers, however, is somewhat more precarious and, from their perspective, additional difficulties must be taken into consideration. Firstly, there is the issue of language. Almost all the narratives were recorded in English. While the language ability of most of the narrators was adequate, some experienced difficulty in expressing themselves clearly, others were not confident about their language skills and, in a few cases, the narrator spoke only very basic English. In one case, the narrator chose to make his recording in Arabic, but this removed the possibility of interaction between the narrator and the researcher. A second difficulty was located in the state of mind of participants. Some felt anxious about speaking “on the record”; they were afraid their words might fall into the wrong hands. Others believed that they had nothing of any interest or importance to say. A few were suspicious about my motives. Since I am British, they assumed I might have a “hidden agenda” or that it might be discourteous to speak negatively to me about the British. Thirdly, some Yemenis taking part – and I imagine this is true for British narrators too – were less than candid. They preferred to speak about everyday matters, for example the excellence of the British system of education, rather than revealing possibly more interesting, more personal information. Although this may at least partially be cultural, it means that we may not get the full picture. Finally, there are political considerations. Some of the narrators are speaking within a framework of current political reality. They may be constrained by

their status; either they wish to appear loyal to the present regime or they have an axe to grind.

An additional difficulty lies in the process of analysis and interpretation once the recordings have been collected, which leads to a new set of challenges about using the material in a responsible and exciting way. What brings the two sides together is the question of ownership of the narrative and how it is used, and the outcome is “the result of a relationship, of a shared project in which both the interviewer and the interviewee are involved together, if not necessarily in harmony”.²⁷ While it is true that all the people so far interviewed agreed to participate in the project on the basis of a shared sense that it was worth doing, our agendas – on both the British and the Yemeni sides – may not necessarily always coincide. I will now turn to the narratives themselves in order to explore some of the ideas and tensions discussed above.

Aden as a case study of oral history

I decided at the beginning of the Aden oral history project that I wanted to speak to as wide a range of individuals as possible. They should include samples of all aspects of life in the final days of the British Empire, from – on the British side – political officers and decision-makers to ordinary soldiers, business people and the wives who accompanied some of these men; and – on the Yemeni side – those who worked with the British, those who fought against them and those who had no particular involvement with either side. My initial enquiry was met with enthusiasm by people from many walks of life, most of whom are now retired, who were keen to share their memories of that time “before it’s too late”. Many of these individuals shared a belief, very much encouraged

by the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol, that it is vital to preserve the past in ways that go beyond the dry words of official documents, the formal accounts of government functionaries or the “grand narratives” of history.

In the increasingly globalized and “politically correct” world of the early 21st century, it is difficult for some of us to imagine what the British Empire must have felt like and how it played a role in British life as late as the 1960s. The oral history project focuses not just on the voices of the supposedly powerful, but also on the many others, the silenced and disempowered voices of history.

For ambitious young men, the colonial service was regarded as both potentially exciting and also a good career move. In the words of a man who worked as private secretary to the last High Commissioner in Aden, Sir Humphrey Trevelyan:

*“For me, a young Arabist, it was a unique opportunity – rather as if an American diplomat coming to Europe was able to spend a little time with Robin Hood in the greenwood. The tribal game was still being played according to the old rules: you scored by killing a male member of the other tribe, and if you killed so many that the other side could not level the score even by wiping your side out, you could draw stumps”.*²⁸

Many of the men who started life as junior political officers in Aden went on to rise up the diplomatic ladder. According to one narrator:

“I think it was a sense of adventure. I had been a young soldier in the Suez campaign and that had started my interest in the Middle East. I heard about this job, which was being advertised, as I was nearing the end of my university career and I wasn’t particularly attracted by working at home... When I got that extraordinary letter of appointment, which made the job sound devastatingly exciting, if slightly untrue, I think my sense of

²⁷ Portelli, “What makes oral history different”, p.70.

adventure was sparked, so off I went. I really didn't have much idea about the Middle East, apart from the Arab-Israel problem. But what was happening in the Aden protectorate was a complete mystery to me and nobody told me until I got there".²⁹

Many Yemenis speak fondly of the British colonial period. They remember “*good hospitals, good schools*”. According to a man who became a prominent politician in the north:

*“I enjoyed life in Aden during the British days. It was very advanced – in education, medicine, law and order. There were schools, hospitals, a post office, a chamber of commerce”.*³⁰

A man from a poor family in the Protectorates, who worked as a houseboy so that he could pay for his education, spoke of his first memories of Aden:

*“I was amazed at this civilization: asphalt roads, traffic, respect for rules, cleanliness and the appearance of the street, everyone nicely dressed. I quickly got used to it”.*³¹

Aden “*was a very prosperous city*”, in the words of someone else who arrived from the Protectorates at the age of six, “*it was an easy life, things were cheap*”.³² Said one man: “*During British times, the important thing was the rule of law. People abided by the law, unlike now*”.³³ Another remarked that “*the judiciary during the British days was of a very high standard...but it suffered after independence*”.³⁴ A number of Yemeni narrators recalled the vibrant social life at that time. There were sports clubs, for girls as well as boys, parties, cinema. Others remembered the cosmopolitan nature of the city.

²⁸ Miles, Oliver, “The British withdrawal from Aden: A personal memory”, published by the British-Yemeni Society, December 1997.

²⁹ Interview with Peter Hinchcliffe, 9 February 2000.

³⁰ Interview, Sana’a, 30 September 2003.

³¹ Interview, Aden, 6 October 2003.

³² Interview, Aden, 8 October 2003.

³³ Interview, Sana’a, 1 October 2003.

³⁴ Interview, Aden, 4 October 2003.

There were many nationalities, commented one man, “Indians, Africans, Europeans”.³⁵

A retired government official recalled:

*“There were no restrictions on religion during British rule. In Crater, there was a Jewish area, including a synagogue, and many Jewish shops. These were closed after independence. The Hindus also left”.*³⁶

As security began to deteriorate at the beginning of the 1960s, the British army was drafted into Aden. This brought large numbers of inexperienced young men, many of whom suffered illness or homesickness. It was a place where British soldiers were sent, according to one former soldier as “a punishment posting for most of the British army, a combination of the sun, flies and disease”.³⁷ Someone else describes Aden as “Smelly! It was the smell! That was the prevailing...I can smell it now! It was a mixture of...drains and the general heat. It wasn't a very nice smell”.³⁸

According to another eye witness:

*“The political situation was very confused. The overarching problem was that everything was conducted in a murderous atmosphere. There were two main rivals for power there. One was called the NLF – National Liberation Front, and they I believe were backed by Egypt, and Nasir was, at that time, the ruler of Egypt. The other main terrorist organization that was bidding for power was called FLOSY – the Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen – and they were killing people with some frequency, largely Arab, but Europeans were caught in the crossfire and sometimes Europeans were deliberately murdered”.*³⁹

³⁵ Interview, Aden, 6 October 2003.

³⁶ Interview, Aden, 5 October 2003.

³⁷ Interview with George Hutchison, 10 February 2000.

³⁸ Interview with Trevor Austin, 1 March 2000.

³⁹ Interview with Lt Col Peter Raleigh, 12 April 2000.

Not everyone grasped or even had much interest in what was going on around them. Many narrators expressed bewilderment or indifference, while others passed their time in Aden in blissful ignorance. Many of the people interviewed found life in Aden itself to be relatively pleasant. One man described Aden as “civilized”, “a perpetual round of drinks parties”.⁴⁰ Another man, who worked at the BP refinery for eight years, described his social life as “wonderful”. He spoke of frequent dances, a tennis club, a restaurant, a library and a snooker table.⁴¹ BP was a self-contained community of expats, situated about 20 miles outside Aden itself. It employed approximately British 300 staff who lived in comfortable air-conditioned accommodation with their families. BP also employed local people, as well as Somalis and other Arabs.

A man who worked for P & O recalled a “hectic” social life:

*“There was a place called the Lido, where families used to go to the beach. But they didn’t have a shark net in my day, and there was one lady – one of the wives – who was walking, paddling in the water, about a foot of water, and a shark came in and took her foot off while we were there, which was rather dramatic”.*⁴²

A former Aden Airways manager gave a flavour of life for a young, unmarried man at that time:

“I went out to parties six nights a week, and the seventh night I entertained at home. It was a wonderful social life! It was mostly meeting people in the company and a few from other commercial firms. Less frequently, it was meeting the military – this was certainly on the dinner party type of thing. Quite frequently, though, I used to go to parties that the General Manager and his wife held – I think bachelors were usually in demand at those sorts of things. They were held at his house down at Ras Boradli,

⁴⁰ Interview with Nigel Pusinelli, 2 February 2000.

⁴¹ Interview, 4 February 2000.

which was a wonderful house for entertaining. Quite frequently, I used to have to go to dinner parties where the AOC and the Admiral – Admiral Le Fanu – I remember he was there quite a lot. And, very occasionally, up at Government House – I think I went there about two or three times. But most of the parties we had were, as I say, among the expatriate community. But I suppose I've always been a bit of a rebel on that sort of thing, and I certainly widened my entertaining to bring in local staff that I got to know through the company. I think some of my expatriate friends were slightly scandalized by this – it didn't seem to be the right thing to do".⁴³

For many ex-pats, life went on in much the same way it did at home. They got married, had families, were promoted, moved house. One narrator described her experiences as a young, newly married woman:

"To have a first child there was a marvellous experience because...there were very few other Brits having babies at the same time – maybe one, maybe two. But when you had your baby, you were the one and the nurses loved to have midwifery experience. So you often gave birth in the presence of about half a dozen midwives, instead of just one. And also, you stayed in hospital for something like a fortnight because nobody wanted you to go home – they all wanted to be dealing with the baby. Whereas now, you know, you're lucky if you're in for 24 hours... But you're very cut off from home. You only had letters. The telephone, at the time, we hardly ever used because it was a one-way conversation – you had to stop and let the other person speak to you, and it was very expensive as well".⁴⁴

But there was more to life in Aden than swimming and parties. A number of narrators revealed something of the tension between, on the one hand, the British colonial

⁴² Interview with William Hall, 2000.

⁴³ Interview with Trevor Austin, 1 March 2000.

⁴⁴ Interview, 4 February 2000.

authorities and, on the other, local nationalists who were agitating for an independent state in southern Yemen.

In the words of a former political officer:

*“I always say the situation in Aden is very akin to what it has been in Northern Ireland. There were two terrorist organizations – FLOSY and NLF – in the same way the IRA and the Protestant thing. And what would happen in Northern Ireland if we suddenly said, ‘right, we’re quitting – the British government...English government will pull out of Northern Ireland, and we’ll leave the RUC and the civil servants who’ve been working for the British government to the devices of whichever the IRA or the Protestants won’. If the IRA won, what would happen to all the Northern Irish who had been loyal to us – and that is exactly what has happened in Aden. We held the ring while FLOSY and the NLF had a private fight... The NLF won, and we said, ‘Okay, we’ll hand over to you’. And Lord Shackleton met them in Geneva, I think it was two or three days before the final quit and said, ‘right, we will be out on 30 November and you can come in the next day’ – or maybe on the 29th. And we just pulled the whole government out. We left the offices in the care of the various South Arabians who had been brought up through the service, and it was a tragedy. And we knew that, as soon as we went, those South Arabian officers who’d been loyal to us – they all got shot or imprisoned or fled the country”.*⁴⁵

A Yemeni narrator pointed out that the NLF or FLOSY were not the only factions struggling for independence:

“The South Arabian League Party was founded in Aden in April 1951. It was the first party in South Yemen. It had great influence... They thought that they will fight the British through peaceful means. They didn’t think they would reach the point that they would carry guns. Because they thought that Britain will have dialogue with them, will have a negotiation.

⁴⁵ Interview with Nigel Pusinelli, 2 February 2000.

*They didn't realize that they would have to reach the point to carry machine guns and so on. So – what the party wanted. First, liberation – then, independence. Second, to unite the whole parts of South Arabia. The South Arabia, at that time, consisted of...about 23 small emirates, sheikhdoms and sultanates. The party aimed to unite all these parts in one central government. And to have peaceful and good relations with Britain – this is what we were looking for. So, when the British authority realized that the party has great influence, they thought that the better way is to get rid of them. First...the leadership of the party to be...get rid of it out of the country. So they exiled them to Egypt. And to crush those who support the party inside the country. And we were the victims – my family and my tribe and our area – it was the victim of this”.*⁴⁶

Other Yemenis also emphasized the growing pressure for independence. Said one woman:

*“In 1963, the NLF and FLOSY started the revolution from the Radfan mountains. Everyone started to understand that there was a new movement in the life of the country, a fight for a new life. We began with labour strikes and demonstrations in support of President Nasir after the nationalization of the Suez Canal and in support of the revolution in the north. Our aim was Yemeni unification... There was a lot of tension, killing, random assassinations”.*⁴⁷

British “apprehension was increased by the constant propaganda of Cairo Radio...which ceaselessly proclaimed that the British would be expelled from the Arab world”.⁴⁸ A former army officer recalls Radio Cairo, “*the pervasive political influence throughout the whole of the period*”.⁴⁹ Another soldier also remembers the role of Radio Cairo:

⁴⁶ Interview, London, 10 April 2000.

⁴⁷ Interview, Aden, 5 October 2003.

⁴⁸ Bidwell, *The Two Yemens*, p.130.

⁴⁹ Interview with Alan D'Arcy, 10 March 2000.

“I think there was a five thousand shilling price on my head – and I was one of the lowest, I was down in the pecking order; I mean, some of the officers had higher ones on...the Arabs would come up to us and say, ‘well, you’re worth more dead than alive!’ They knew, they knew who we were. And when...I was in Cairo and we stayed in the Hilton Hotel in Cairo, and right opposite the Hilton Hotel is the Cairo radio station. And I found it hard to believe, that here I was all these years – 40 years later – within a hundred yards of the place where they used to broadcast all the propaganda. There’s still an armed guard around it now!”⁵⁰

A Yemeni in Aden recalled the mounting pressures for independence:

“People began to feel it was time for independence. Britain only developed areas to serve its own needs. There were houses for British soldiers and their families; Yemenis could not afford these houses... So people felt angry. They were inspired by the revolution in the north... They started building revolutionary committees”⁵¹

Some narrators commented critically on the British role in Aden and the Protectorates. A

former Assistant Advisor in the Aden Protectorate Service, for example, noted that

“there was quite a lot of money around in those days. The 50s had been a golden age, the Macmillan era. I think there was a certain amount of guilt on the part of the British that the Protectorate, in particular, had been neglected for years and years and years. Aden, of course, was a Crown Colony – that was the real raison d’etre, and they really ought to catch up a little bit on development in the protectorate states”⁵²

A Yemeni in Aden agreed:

“Many felt that Britain had ruled Aden for 129 years but had done nothing. It did not prepare people to take over. Everything was done for British development. The people were deceived”⁵³

⁵⁰ Interview with George Hutchison

⁵¹ Interview, Aden, 10 October 2003.

⁵² Interview with Professor Rex Smith, 12 May 2000.

⁵³ Interview, Aden, 10 October 2003.

In the opinion of a British ex-soldier, the British brought no positive benefits at all to Aden:

*“The policies were abysmal. There was very little done that I can think of – or remember – that was done to help the Arabs, very little. The only thing I could see was money spent, almost, to bring the Arabs down, deride them and make them second rate citizens in their own country. I had some good friends who were Arabs, and that was Yemeni and Adenis, and they kept saying to me ‘why are you here, if you’re not going to help us?’ And we weren’t helping – we just weren’t helping them”.*⁵⁴

According to a former army officer:

*“There were no relations with the local people. With hindsight, horribly so. But, at that time, one did not speak – one did not address, in effect, anyone locally – one did not know anyone locally. There was a complete divide between the British colonials and the local population”.*⁵⁵

As time went on, life became increasingly dangerous for the British population. A former airline pilot recalls:

“Certainly, lives were at risk, but just from ordinary casual terrorists. Mary and I were in...a restaurant-cum-nightclub in Khormaksar, and I had my Volvo parked outside, and there was a bang, and a policeman came in and said ‘is that your Volvo out there?’ I said ‘yes’, he said ‘well somebody’s just thrown a grenade at it!’ Fortunately, the grenade just hit the back window, broke it and bounced off – before it went off. So it didn’t do my car any damage – it made a bit of a mess of a Mercedes behind me... I had a base plug of a grenade came rattling on to the veranda one night. The grenade went off just outside. And, of course, there were people killed. A senior RAF officer lost his daughter. A grenade was

⁵⁴ Interview with George Hutchison.

⁵⁵ Interview with Alan D’Arcy.

*thrown into a children's party – of all things. It killed this poor little girl”.*⁵⁶

Another narrator recorded how

*“on one occasion, we went into the Ma’alla market and looked around there – it was a Sunday morning – and we always followed each other so that, you know, we had as much protection as possible. But it seemed to be...Ma’alla was reckoned to be a reasonably safe sort of place. We went round the market and then went out, got in the car and drove down to the beach. A couple of hours later, we heard that two Royal Air Force men in civilian clothes had been shot and killed in the market. We always reckoned that we had been seen and the word went around that there were two Europeans in the market, and by the time they’d got the killers around, we’d gone and those two other chaps came in and, unfortunately, got killed. Very chastening... There were some very very nasty incidents... One was always conscious that someone could take a shot at you. I mean, people were killed when they slowed down to go round a roundabout – and that sort of thing. So, you know, you went round a roundabout as fast as you could – at least I did!”*⁵⁷

But, for many local people, the violence was a regrettable necessity in the struggle for independence. Commented one man, who was still at school at this time:

*“After 1966, things began to deteriorate. We had curfews after 6pm. Riots and bombs started in 1964, even in 1963. People sympathized with the 1962 Sana’a revolution; they wanted independence from Britain. There were demonstrations in the streets. In 1964 was the biggest demonstration; everyone was involved, even the teachers. The Sawt al-Arab radio from Cairo encouraged people to demonstrate, the ‘heroes’ of the streets of Aden. The radio played songs of revolution and nationalism and this ignited the feelings of the people”.*⁵⁸

A retired architect recalled the closing days of the British presence in Aden:

⁵⁶ Interview with Victor Spencer, 30 March 2000.

⁵⁷ Interview with Trevor Austin, 1 March 2000.

“Of course, when things got really bad, it was not so much fun. I still wanted to go on staying in Aden but, of course, I had to go – with everybody else... We spent a lot of money on Aden and we devoted a lot of people’s lives to the place, and it’s a pity we left under those circumstances”.

A Yemeni narrator had a different perspective:

*“I remember at that time – when I was a kid – we were raising the flag of Egypt because Nasir, at that time, he was a hero of the Arab world. We raised the flag on the top of our home... The British really didn’t...this is my own view...they were not successful in finding a way for a solution. Maybe they were not sincere...I’m not sure what was in their mind... But anyway, these events developed and the clashes continued...against the British forces in Aden, and between the NLF and FLOSY... And we in the south, we are the victims of the outcome”.*⁵⁹

Nonetheless, for many local people, there was great rejoicing on 29 November 1967.

One man recalls: *“The day the British left, people were celebrating in the streets. They did not sleep”.*⁶⁰

The Security Adviser to the High Commissioner at the time the British pulled out of Aden, recalled the final hours of British rule:

“The telephone rang and it was picked up by Sir John Willoughby, the Land Force Commander, and he said ‘oh, this is for you’, and it was the SAS over at Ittihad, having found this explosive device, telling me what they had found. So I told the meeting what the situation was and, rather whimsically – well, they looked at me – rather whimsically, Sir John Willoughby said ‘well, old boy, it’s over to you’, and Sir Richard Turnbull said ‘Peter’, he said, ‘do we go or do we not?’ And I thought, well, here we are! There’s a full Admiral, there’s the Commander of Police, a Major

⁵⁸ Interview, Aden, 6 October 2003.

⁵⁹ Interview, London, 10 April 2000.

⁶⁰ Interview, Aden, 6 October 2003.

General, there's an Air Vice Marshall – and it's over to me! So I said, 'Sir, we go', and we went, and everything passed very smoothly".⁶¹

Or, in the words of the High Commissioner's private secretary:

"The end was a mystery. The Front for the Liberation of South Yemen, absurdly known as FLOSY, the darling of Cairo, of the United Nations and of a great part of the British Labour Party, with its leaders like Makkawi and Asnag, all ready to step into their ministerial offices, was blown away in a few weeks by a mysterious organisation known to us as the National Liberation Front – the Qawmiyin. Who were they? How did they do it? How was it that, when we eventually sat down with them for our hasty handover negotiations in Geneva, we recognised more than one face we had known in the federal army or the armed police people of whose true purpose we had known nothing".⁶²

Another commentator noted sadly:

"Unlike most of the colonies that became independent, there was no...for a lot of them it didn't do them much good in the long run – like Uganda and so forth – but nevertheless, there was a proper handover to a proper government. You know – the flag came down and everybody saluted and shook hands all round, and away they went. It didn't happen in Aden, you see. Aden was, as I say, it was an evacuation. You know, they were still shooting each other when we left".⁶³

Some Yemeni narrators have mixed feelings about the end of British rule. Although it was generally greeted with joy, there was much criticism about the way the British left.

Said one man: *"The British government lost interest. They just ran away and left Aden with no government. There was nothing prepared for the future".⁶⁴* Another commented

⁶¹ Interview with Lt Col Peter Raleigh, 12 April 2000.

⁶² Oliver Miles, "The British withdrawal from Aden".

⁶³ Interview with Victor Spencer, 30 March 2000.

⁶⁴ Interview, Aden, 10 October 2003.

that he was “angry about the British policy of the last few years in Aden. It came by force. They made treaties by force and left when they wanted. There was no policy”.⁶⁵

In the view of another:

“After over 130 years, the British were leaving. It was strange. People worried about how the British would leave the country. There would be no more support. Everything started to deteriorate. The new government was not economically strong. Even old people said that the British should have provided at least technical support. Aden deserved something better from Britain”.⁶⁶

A narrator recalled the transition period:

“All the NLF leadership were young. They had no experience. The first government was good but after, in 1969, the left wing took power from the educated people. They turned to the Soviet Union. This was the worst time in people’s lives. They lost law and order, welfare, businesses; the state nationalized everything. It was a very military regime. The party ruled everything”.⁶⁷

Some Yemenis regret the departure of the British but there is much anger too. One man suggested that “Britain did not fulfil its moral obligation”,⁶⁸ whilst another criticized the British army’s failure to protect the civilian population.⁶⁹ A few commented that the British are appreciated in light of what came next. But most speak positively of the need to move on. Concluded one woman: “We must see it as progress. It is sometimes good and sometimes bad”.⁷⁰

Conclusion

⁶⁵ Interview, Aden, 5 October 2003.

⁶⁶ Interview, Aden, 6 October 2003.

⁶⁷ Interview, Aden, 7 October 2003.

⁶⁸ Interview, Aden, 8 October 2003.

⁶⁹ Interview, Aden, 10 October 2003.

⁷⁰ Interview, Aden, 5 October 2003.

Much of what happened during the last years and months of British colonial rule in Aden is confused and contested, and much depends on whom one is talking to. There are several “grand narratives”: the narrative of nationalist struggle is pitted against the narrative of heroic British rule in the face of uncontrolled terrorism; the narrative of regional meddling is juxtaposed against the narrative of enlightened development. Where does the truth lie? Oral history teaches us that there is not a single “truth” but, rather, a series of stories from which it is possible to extract a much more complex, more richly textured version of history.

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