Elizabeth Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East, 1914-1971* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1981), 254 pp., ISBN-10: 0701125551/ISBN-13: 978-0701125554, £34.44

On 21 November 1963, President John F. Kennedy placed several books on his nightstand in Forth Worth, Texas. One was the original 1963 edition of Elizabeth Monroe's *Britain's Moment in the Middle East, 1914-1971*.[1] A slim volume, out of print and difficult to find, Monroe's work remains a perennial favourite of colonial historians, Middle East hands, and policy wonks alike. Why should a book, nearly forty years after its second edition, merit our attention? What can it teach us that subsequent decades of war and corruption have not? What questions could it possibly ask that have not already been answered?

'In Middle Eastern history and fable,' observed Monroe, 'forty years is a common measure of time' (p.2). Spanning the roughly forty years of British involvement in the Middle East, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East* charts how a series of short-term pragmatic decisions diverted British foreign policy from its original, rational (if ignoble) intentions. An erstwhile *Economist* reporter, Monroe's venture into history weds penetrating analysis with still-warm experience. Yet, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East* survives as a book of history, not merely a book about history. Indeed, the region's subsequent history has made Monroe a fabulist: contemporary readers will perceive a tale of moral caution undergirding the incisive narrative.

The book unfolds in three acts. Act one, 'Strategic Exploitation,' covers the period from the First World War through to 1922. For British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey and Prime Minister David Lloyd George the lands and people of the Middle East mattered only in conjunction with other countries. London valued the Levant, North Africa, and Mesopotamia largely for their

[1] The original title was *Britain's Moment in the Middle East: 1914-1956*.

geographic proximity to India. British power in those lands would confound Russian imperial strivings and simultaneously protect valuable trade routes. Grey and Lloyd George saw Arab nationalism as a tool with which to destabilise the enemy Ottoman Empire; Lloyd George viewed the potential to create a Jewish homeland as an ancillary benefit in the same wartime effort. The Middle East itself bore little consideration on its own, a fateful oversight that led to some of Britain's most consequential errors: The Balfour Declaration, the Sykes-Picot agreement, the McMahon letters – these conflicting policies each make sense contextually, argues Monroe, if not in conjunction or sequence. Yet context is not absolution; Monroe deemed the Balfour Declaration, for example, 'one of the greatest mistakes in [British] imperial history' (p.43).

The second act comprises the 'Years of Good Governance,' in which Britain contributes simultaneously to infrastructural development and popular unrest in the British Middle East. Monroe described how the blossoming oil fields across the Middle East muddled British attempts to build stability in the region. Here, her arguments show their age and origin: for Monroe, 'Middle Eastern nationalism narrowed to vanishing point the gap between the commercial and the diplomatic handling of oil affairs' (p.114). The rather emaciated chapter on local resistance fills just 12 pages, a vestige of Monroe's historiographical milieu before area studies and the anthropological turn enriched our perspectives on power and causation in history. The absence in the book of Arab men and women who lived with Imperial Britain will resonate with the modern reader, even as Monroe constructed a case for the benefits of British rule.

In the third act, when the confluence of waning political will for empire and straitened financial circumstances after the Second World War led to a 'Loss of [British] Nerve' in the region, more egregious mismanagement resulted. Yet, Monroe maintained, imperial hamartia – the sum of Britain's foundational errors – did not outweigh the benefit British rule brought to the region. The

latter chapters cover roughly 1945 through the Suez Crisis of 1956. Monroe's forgiving assessment of Eden in these chapters suggests some frustration. She noted the Prime Minister's diminished capacity for empathy, and attributed Eden's policy choices to misguided, but understandable, 'habit[s] of authority ... and the distaste for Egypt that coloured British action all along' (p. 205). Since the moment Israeli forces invaded Suez, suspicion that Prime Minister Anthony Eden knowingly conspired with French Prime Minister Guy Mollet and Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion abounded. Eden dreamed of toppling Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's regime, but he insisted to the House of Commons that he had no foreknowledge of the ill-fated Suez escapade. Thus, Monroe carefully balanced the scales of help and harm when assessing Britain's, and specifically the Prime Minister's, role in the Suez Crisis, empathising within a hair's breadth of sympathising.

By the late 1970s, leaks and memoirs confirmed those suspicions, and made clear that Eden had lied to the House of Commons about his secret agreement with Mollet and Ben Gurion in the Protocol of Sèvres. In light of these revelations, Monroe issued in 1981 a revised edition of *Britain's Moment,* featuring a different ending than President Kennedy might have read. Monroe's balanced scale tips in 'Nightfall,' the new final chapter. Her fair-minded perspicacity in previous chapters sharpens the acerbity of her added criticisms.

The book's own history casts into sharp focus the shift in British policy from ill-informed but well-intentioned approaches to outright insincerity. *Britain's Moment* endures as essential reading because it charts this transition with clarity and economy, conjuring up larger questions for today's superpowers: What does a preponderant power owe its weaker allies? How does national interest translate into foreign policy? Why do expedient policy decisions dissolve into impasse and bloodshed? That pundits would draw a line connecting the British Empire to American economic

and military hegemony make Monroe's fable – and its moral – germane. Monroe's view is skewed heavily to London, and might have benefitted from a nuanced assessment of tensions that developed between Foreign Officers in the field and their counterparts in the metropole. Moreover, the book lacks sensitivity to Arab national strivings and fails to face the corrosive damage that prioritising stability over good governance wrought on the region. Yet, as history and fable, Monroe's work still stands: persistently relevant and irresistibly cogent.

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