THE GEOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

MAN AND NATURE IN CENTRAL ARABIA


The attention of readers of the Geographical Review has already been directed to Philby's explorations in Arabia in 1917–1918. In an article by D. G. Hogarth ("Some Recent Arabian Explorations," Geogr. Rev., Vol. 11, 1921, pp. 334–337) there was given a succinct account of his remarkable expedition across the peninsula in the winter of 1917 and of his journey of three hundred miles southwestward from Riyadh to Wadi Dawasir and back during the following summer. The outstanding results of the latter journey were also stated in an earlier note (Vol. 10, 1920, p. 347). In the present review, therefore, no attempt will be made to repeat what has already been said in these places about the more strictly geographical aspects of Philby's work.

The two volumes now under consideration contain a complete narrative of the crossing of Arabia. The account of the wanderings of 1918, however, breaks off upon Philby's return to the Wahabi capital from southern Nejd. It is a pity that circumstances did not permit the author to tell of his subsequent adventures and of the part he took in Ibn Sa'ud's campaign against Haiil.

Philby's book is the first full and satisfactory account of nature and man in a region about which, prior to his travels, Western knowledge had been of the vaguest and most confusing sort. Much of this region had never before been seen by Western eyes. Other parts, though discussed by Palgrave and possibly visited by him (Mr. Philby doubts that he visited them) were described in such misleading and contradictory terms as to be wholly incomprehensible. It is a fortunate circumstance, therefore, that Philby was endowed with keen powers of observation and a thorough knowledge of the Arabic language. It is perhaps even more fortunate that through his official position as representative of Great Britain he was received with favor by Ibn Sa'ud, the ruler of Nejd, and Al Hasa, under whose protection he traveled, and that the peaceful conditions established by Ibn Sa'ud's strong hand enabled him to traverse, unmolested, districts that would have been totally inaccessible not many years earlier. Philby made the most of his opportunities; and his book, consequently, is if anything more notable for the picture it paints of Arabian character and customs than for the new light it sheds upon the geography and topography of the Arabian peninsula. In this respect "The Heart of Arabia" can stand comparison with Doughty's all-too-little-read but none the less immortal "Travels in Arabia Deserta." But far different were the conditions of Philby's wanderings from those of his great predecessor in the tracts lying northward and westward. Where Doughty, the penniless outcast and despised "Nasrani," sought, sometimes vainly, the humble hospitality of the Bedouin, Philby was enabled to establish cordial and often familiar relations with the amirs and other local representatives of Ibn Sa'ud. Not that these moments were lacking, as when the explorer and his party "marched in grim silence along the southern wall" of the town of Dam in Wadi Dawasir "under the sullen glare of its assembled people, knowing that the cry of a single fanatic or a madman's shot might precipitate a crisis in face of which, commanded as we were by every roof, we should have been powerless" (Vol. 2, p. 190). But such moments were rare, and for the most part events went along smoothly enough.

The extraordinary interest of the interior of Arabia lies largely in the fact that here is to be found one of the few remaining parts of the world where there still exists at the present time a strongly centralized and capably administered state virtually untouched by Western civilization. Here are no railroads, telegraphs, nor electric lights; neither is there democracy nor communism nor even the desire of such. We step back into a good old Oriental despotism ruled by the personal force of one man. The despot in the case, Ibn Sa'ud, is not only a man of iron but a personality of exceptional magnetism and a remarkably astute politician. An example of his skilful manipulation of the religious fanaticism of his realm to serve the ends of statecraft is furnished in his organization of the Ikhwan, or "Brothers," created only about ten years ago. This "new freemasonry" which "has in the course of the decade transformed the character of Badawin society and caused a flutter of anxiety throughout Arabia" is "nothing but a Wahabi revival in an intensified form." By the establishment of colonies of Ikhwan fanatically devoted to his interests in all parts of his territories Ibn Sa'ud has been able to bring peace and order
to wide tracts where formerly there reigned incessant robbery, bloodshed, and petty warfare.

How long this peace and security will last, how long the successors of Ibn Sa'ud may be able to hold together a people who, through dispersal and fragmentation in oases scattered far and wide in the midst of deserts and steppes, are incessantly played upon by the disruptive forces of nature and of inclination—these are problems that Philby assures us lay heavy on Ibn Sa'ud's mind.

It is difficult to refrain from writing at length of some of the many lesser details treated in these volumes: the comments on the Puritanical austerity of the Wahabis; the brilliant picture of the army of Ibn Sa'ud on the march, like a medieval host with myriad of fluttering banners; the description of the town of Riadh, with its severely unornamented architecture, and of other settlements and oases; the sympathetic sketches of Arab character and the multitude of human touches. An amusing account of the difficulties experienced by Philby's escort as they drew near Mecca in determining the direction of the Holy City in order that prayers might be properly oriented—a matter of vast moment in the practice of Islam—will appeal to the humor of the geographically minded. The student of geographical nomenclature will find much in the illuminating discussions of Arab usage regarding place and regional names and their adaptation to the physiographic features of the country. The descriptions of the land forms are usually clear, even though obviously not the work of a trained physiographer. Each of these points and many more besides well deserve more extended comment.

Especially noteworthy, however, are the data which Philby gathered from a native of those parts regarding the great southern desert, or Empty Quarter. Of all Europeans Philby approached the nearest to the northern border of this immense tract, probably the largest expanse of unknown land in the world outside the Antarctic continent. As frequently happens under similar circumstances, more detailed knowledge of the Empty Quarter leads Philby to believe that it is not so terribly barren as had hitherto been supposed. The tribe of Al Murra manage to eke a precarious living from its surface. These are a primitive folk, only recent adherents of Islam, who "lead a life as lean and wild as anything one can imagine." In a vast sandy tract of Khiran within their confines the Al Murra tell of a buried city frequented by Jinns or ghosts to be "heard of a windy night moaning piteously over the fate that has overtaken the scene of their lives. . . . It must indeed be an eerie spot, thatdead city of the past far away from human ken, and may be the salty pools about it are all that is left of a great oasis of those times before the sand swept over the face of Southern Arabia."

Philby's exceptionally vivid and distinguished style is marred only by the tendency to make use of excessively long sentences. Were it not for this minor defect we should be tempted to class "The Heart of Arabia" with Doughty's "Travels in Arabia Deserta," Borrow's "Bible in Spain," and some of the writings of W. H. Hudson: among the few books that stand apart by themselves as masterpieces of English travel literature.

THE STORY OF LONG ISLAND


The purpose of this essay is "to trace the development of a people as it has been affected not only by its social and economic but by its natural surroundings." In the evolution of Long Island the author sees an unfinished play—a game between two mighty forces, the ocean and the hinterland.

A brief sketch of the historical geology and physiography of Long Island lays the scene for the drama. The reader regrets a little that no physiographic map of the island is included, as for reference such a map is superior to the best description (the only illustration is an outline map on the scale 1:700,000). Given the environment, we are ready to visualize the life of the early settlers, most of them pioneer farmers who labored "only to get bread and clothing, without hopes of ever seeing a penny of monies." Interest in scientific agriculture awoke when improved transportation made Long Island feel sharply the competition of the great virgin lands of the West. This competition of the hinterland later forced the Long Island farmer to change from general farming to dairying and truck gardening.