

# Introduction

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## LESSONS FROM LETHE'S GROTTO

ON THE OUTER fringes of the city of Benghazi, amid otherwise largely barren surroundings of bare limestone, lies the underground cavern of Lethe, known in ancient times as the source of waters which, when consumed, resulted in forgetfulness, oblivion or death.

The water flowing in the grotto seems to be part of a larger subterranean lake and, locally, people assume that it flows towards the sea, emerging near a seaside bathing spot known as the Blue Lagoon. The same water probably also feeds a series of hollows in the surrounding area that are marked by vegetation flourishing in this otherwise rocky terrain. But even now, in the 21st century, no one really knows where the Lethe river actually rises or where it flows to.

Getting down into the cavern itself is no easy matter because the path is often slippery from the droppings of rock doves that nest in the cliff ledges above its narrow entrance. Those who have stood on the cramped, muddy ledge in this gloomy spot say that the water is from a stream that flows away through two tunnels that disappear into complete darkness.<sup>1</sup> The uninspiring appearance of the cavern and the difficult access could well have given rise to the idea that the waters here are not for the living but more for the dead, or strictly speaking, for the ghosts of those who have only just departed. The classical myth of Lethe, one of five rivers of the underworld, declares that before they can be reincarnated, the ghosts of the dead have to come here to drink its waters, so as to forget their previous life and become ready to enter a new body.

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<sup>1</sup> Vivid descriptions of Lethe are given by Gwyn Williams in *Green Mountain: An informal guide to Cyrenaica and its Jebel Akhdar*, London, 1963, pp26–7, and by Anthony Thwaite in *The Deserts of Hesperides: An Experience of Libya*, London, 1969, p62. A recent glossy brochure portraying Benghazi as the 'Venice of North Africa' highlights the waters of Lethe as one of 'a string of pearls' for visitors interested in the city's history and archaeology.

That a place so closely resembling the surviving descriptions of Lethe's Grotto can be found in Libya is a reminder that the ancient Greek world once extended across the Mediterranean and fully incorporated most of this land once known by the Greeks as Pentapolis (after its five cities) and by the Romans as Cyrenaica (after Cyrene), and then later as Barqa (after the city of Barca) by Arab settlers. During the Greek era, the region developed its own unique personality and reputation. Cyrene's school of philosophy was famous for encouraging people to strive towards happiness and good cheer. And in both Greek and Roman times a local herb called *Silphium* was greatly sought after as a valuable cure for aches and pains of all kinds, a powerful seasoning and, some claimed, an aphrodisiac.<sup>2</sup>

For over 1,000 years, the empires of Greece, Persia, Egypt and Rome all had dealings with and made their impact in this country, but it lost its importance after a succession of earthquakes damaged many of the earliest buildings and its magic herb *Silphium* became extinct through over-harvesting. Even before the Arab invasion of the 7th century AD, the ancient cities were easy targets for marauding nomads driven up from the Sahara as the desert encroached towards the coastline. But Cyrenaica's historic marvels and mysteries have continued to exert a strong appeal for those who have passed this way ever since.

In the rocky mountain range now known as the Jebel Akhdar (the Green Mountain), the ruins of Cyrene stand on a plateau at 488 m and command a stunning view over a steep escarpment towards the little port of Apollonia (also known as Susa) and the vast blue Mediterranean beyond. The ancient city's unique Sanctuary and Temple of Apollo, its amphitheatres and its huge and fully colonnaded Roman forum have all managed to survive the ravages of time, earthquakes and the weather, as well as the relentless assaults of treasure hunters. According to UNESCO, this is 'one of the most impressive complexes of ruins in the entire world'. Although a new wave of theft and vandalism since the upheavals of 2011 has done untold damage, its special status is sure to continue for many years yet.

Looking back at events in the 20th century, it might seem that ruination and destruction had returned to symbolise the fate not just of Cyrene but of most of Cyrenaica too. Certainly, over two hellish years in 1941 and 1942, some spectacular infrastructure – only recently installed by the Italians in the late 1930s – was in its turn reduced to rubble.

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<sup>2</sup> A good account of the history of ancient Cyrenaica can be found in John Wright's *A History of Libya*, London, 2010.

A succession of heavily armed campaigns and airborne attacks by the British on the Italians, the Germans on the British and finally the British on the Germans devastated the two port cities of Tobruk and Benghazi, destroyed roads and bridges and littered the whole country with the wreckage of war, tanks, trucks, unexploded mines, shells and bombs.

After its centuries of neglect, Cyrenaica had turned out to be extremely strategic, mainly because of its proximity to Egypt and the Suez Canal, which in 1942 Adolf Hitler was still supremely confident that Rommel could invade and control. Italy's colonial presence had turned this territory into the key zone of conflict between Axis and Allied territory in North Africa. And at the war's end, its strategic value continued to be appreciated.

The era represented in this book may be largely forgotten now, but unlike the ghosts of Lethe, some people succeed in defying oblivion by recording their memories for future generations. Those set out here are a combination of on-the-spot diary entries covering 1943 and 1944, kept by Peter Synge, an officer with the British Military Administration (BMA) in Cyrenaica, and a summary, written later, of his experiences up to the time of his departure in October 1947. I have supplemented these with my much more recent research in the official archives relating to that era and the key events he recorded.

The story of the British period in Cyrenaica is not widely known and has only recently come to be studied closely by academic historians.<sup>3</sup> It was a period of transition, an interregnum, between the pre-war Italian colonisation and the United Nations-sponsored independence for the whole of Libya, but it was also an intense effort to steer events in the British interest at a time of profound upheaval throughout the Middle East.

Describing the crisis that overwhelmed the British Empire in the Middle East in the late 1940s, the American historian William Roger Louis makes the astute observation that in Cyrenaica the British were presiding over 'the birth of a state, though this was not obvious to many contemporary observers and sometimes not even to those directly involved'.<sup>4</sup> This is an uncannily appropriate characterisation of the proceedings recorded by Peter. His account serves to confirm that, from the outset, few of the BMA's officers were fully aware of the ultimate outcome that they or their successors were working towards. Of the

<sup>3</sup> One example of the revived interest in the period is the account given by Anna Baldinetti in *The Origins of the Libyan Nation: Colonial legacy, exile and the emergence of a new nation-state*, Abingdon, 2010, pp113–5.

<sup>4</sup> W. R. Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945–1951*, Oxford, 1984, p268.

many different characters in the story, only a handful had a grasp of the bigger picture.

The diary that Peter Synge painstakingly kept remained unread by anyone but him until I decided to examine it closely in 2011, mainly because I was intrigued to see if there were mentions of the same places that were at the time appearing daily on the news, as the uprising against Muammar Qadhafi ripped through Libya in the course of that year. I discovered that my father had served two long spells of duty in Benghazi (where the rebellion first erupted in February 2011 and where the first NATO action was taken to prevent the city's recapture by Qadhafi on 18 March 2011). Peter had also been administrator in Ajedabia (Ajdabiyya, the town where young fighters resisted Qadhafi's forces early in the rebellion, and which in 2013 and 2014 went on to become the centre of a tussle for control of eastern Libya's oil revenues) and he had held postings at Beda (al-Bayda, close to the ancient ruined city of Cyrene) and Tobruk, with the result that he came to know the country extremely well in the four and a half years he spent there.

I had always been aware that at some time during the war my father came into close personal contact with the future king, Mohammed al-Mahdi Idris al-Sanussi, but I knew none of the details with any certainty. As my father told it, the story was a humorous one, involving the loan of his underwear when Idris complained of feeling cold. Now, on checking through the memoir, I discovered his rather more significant claim that this action had helped save Idris's first historic visit to Cyrenaica in 1944 from turning into an embarrassing setback for the emerging British game plan for the country. Once the wider context becomes clearer, this story now seems to be an almost perfect metaphor for the sensitivities surrounding the complex negotiations with Idris over a prolonged period. It was, in fact, a crucial early moment in the process I have dubbed 'Operation Idris'. But this did not immediately become apparent when I first read my father's detailed reports of his day-to-day work. There was plenty of drama in the sequence of events he recounted, but it was only after extensive further research that I began to see the bigger picture.

For corroboration and perspective, I made a close comparison of the on-the-spot diary entries and the overall sequence of events in Cyrenaica, as recorded in the files of the War Office and the Foreign Office at the British National Archives. It was soon obvious that this personal story fills a clear gap in the available accounts of the period and provides a fresh angle on some of its dramas. It gives full and vivid substance to the brief – and absurdly over-simplified – summary given

by the man who followed my father as Chief Secretary, E. A. V. De Candole, of 'friendly young Englishmen in khaki shirts and shorts ... dashing about the countryside in dilapidated fifteen-hundredweight trucks, [who] distributed food supplies and helped the tribal and urban leaders to re-establish their affairs on Arab lines.'<sup>5</sup>

Peter Synge's most original contribution to this story comes during the first nine months of 1943, when the candour of his language reflects the fact that he was still finding his feet and dealing with a wholly unfamiliar set of circumstances. Despite being kept almost excessively busy with a wide range of duties, he had a sharp interest in the action around him and was not afraid to criticise several of his British colleagues. Similarly in 1944, his day-to-day entries show exactly how the temporary administration operated and help establish a more complete account of the first visit of Sayyid Mohammed Idris (as he was then known) to his homeland after 22 years of exile – a key moment for him and for Britain – than others I have found.

Starting out at middle management level, Peter was promoted to a more senior role in Cyrenaica at the end of the war, just as the British presence was entering a highly uncertain phase. The authorities were keeping their options open over the timing and tactics for establishing a new nation and also as to whether the focus should be on Cyrenaica or the whole of Libya. Although his memoir neatly describes the uncertainties that followed the war up to the time he left Cyrenaica in October 1947, only the archives fill out the background and take the story forward by a crucial matter of weeks. These were tense and difficult months in which the BMA faced rising local political opposition, but, very much behind the scenes, the way was being prepared for the permanent return of Sayyid Mohammed Idris.

Idris took up residence in a house near Lethe's Grotto in November 1947, whereupon he went on to take the political lead in Cyrenaica, initially as amir (the equivalent of 'prince'), then as king – first of Cyrenaica in 1949 and then of newly independent Libya in December 1951. The cultivation of this largely artificial kingdom – at the time seen as a good guarantee of solid Anglo-Libyan relations for the foreseeable future – raised inevitable difficulties and prompted some controversial decisions along the way. The very issues that contributed to my father's departure from Cyrenaica – he was one of a number who were removed to make way for a new group of administrators in 1947 – turn out to be a revealing part of the larger history.

<sup>5</sup> E. A. V. De Candole, *The Life and Times of King Idris of Libya*, published privately 1990, p73.

Amid rapidly changing dynamics across the Middle East in 1946 and 1947, significant elements of British strategy in the region were being kept highly secret and the relevant documents that clarify the decision-making processes at the time only came into the public domain decades later. And of those who were closest to these processes, there was an inevitable constraint on speaking openly about their work, as the remarkable evidence of my father's immediate successor as Political Secretary, Gervase P. ('Jeff') Cassels, presented in Chapter 13, makes abundantly clear. He was on the spot for the first phase of Cyrenaican independence in 1949 and for the emergence of the whole of Libya as an independent kingdom in 1951–52. His refreshingly honest account of the conduct of the post-independence elections more than confirms the importance Britain placed on seeing Libya become a friendly client kingdom.

If the initial restoration of order after the chaos of war was efficient and returned a measure of stability to Libya, the overall British intentions for the country in the 1940s turn out to have been not only highly complex, reflecting new realities across the region, but also somewhat contradictory at a time of imminent imperial withdrawal from both Palestine and India. Choosing to set the clock back rather than forward, Britain relied on its familiar tactic in the Middle East of finding and bolstering a client monarch who would agree to satisfy its strategic interests and act as a brake on threatening pressures from extremist elements.<sup>6</sup> In the process, considerable intellectual and organisational effort was expended on justifying the Sanussi cause of Idris and installing him in office on the model of the amirate-cum-kingdom in Transjordan (present-day Jordan). In Libya, it was an extraordinary gamble that happened to pay off for the next two decades.

My father was both a witness to, and a key participant in, the crucial first phase of this intensive British involvement. Although he rarely talked about this period of his life, no doubt out of habitual reticence and because of an inevitable preoccupation with day-to-day matters, his memoir captures many moments of significance. And in clear defiance of those shadows of forgetfulness, oblivion and death inherent in the Lethe legend, he made a special effort to preserve his Libyan diaries, knowing that his daily observations might prove enlightening to others at some time in the future. More than anything, it was these on-the-spot insights that convinced me that his was a story worth deciphering and telling for the first time.

<sup>6</sup> As William Roger Louis succinctly put it, 'the case of Libya reveals the classic themes of British imperialism recast in a post-war world.' *The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945–1951*, Oxford, 1984, p265.