

foreword

THE GOAL OF THE memoir editor should be identical to that of the biographer: to shed light on the past by putting the reader inside the mind of a remarkable or representative individual from a bygone era.

Even though the British Military Administration (BMA) of Libya (1942–51) ended roughly 65 years ago, the logic and psychology of its protagonists is already largely buried by the sands of time. Western attitudes towards the Orient, imperialism, ‘natural leaders’, ‘native states’ and ‘pure Arabs’ have changed so rapidly that it requires a great feat of empathy to inhabit the minds of British imperial administrators during and after the Second World War. In the specific case of the BMA in Cyrenaica (eastern Libya), the feat of imagination is further complicated by the dearth of explanatory secondary literature on the subject. In fact, Professor Anna Baldinetti, one of the few authorities on this period of Libyan history, has noted that ‘a complete study concerning the British administration [of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania] still needs to be written’.¹

The publication of Peter Synge’s diaries and memoirs, along with the insightful commentary and historical background provided by his son Richard, an Africa specialist and prolific author, represents a significant first glimpse into the ‘official mind’ of Libya’s British rulers.² Peter’s narrative of day-to-day events – as edited, scrutinised and contextualised by Richard – is a unique and valuable document on at least three counts: its composition, its voice and its organisation.

¹ A. Baldinetti, *The Origins of the Libyan Nation: Colonial legacy, exile and the emergence of a new nation-state*, Abingdon, 2010, footnote 18, Chapter 6, p183.

² For an explanation of how cliques within the British policymaking bureaucracy were prone to form an ‘official mind’, see the seminal texts of R. Robinson, J. Gallagher, A. Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism*, London, 1961, and T. G. Otte, *The Foreign Office Mind: The Making of British Foreign Policy, 1865–1914*, Cambridge, 2011.

Other major players of the BMA (e.g. Duncan Cumming, Lord Rennell of Rodd, Eric De Candole, Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, Norman Anderson) have not left unfiltered personal reminiscences. They may have written memoirs, like De Candole, official histories, like Rennell of Rodd, or left extensive private papers, like Anderson, but for different reasons these all deliberately present sanitised accounts, aiming to burnish the author's legacy, glorify their favourites, justify their actions and portray the BMA as a benign monolith, while ignoring the psychological drama that unfolded among its main protagonists. Conversely, Peter Synge was able to leave an unfiltered account because he was not a professional diplomat, administrator, Orientalist or scholar. In fact, as a factory manager in Egypt's interwar cotton industry, who found himself transformed into a mid-level player in the administration of Cyrenaica by the exigencies of wartime, he seems not to have envisioned that future generations would be sufficiently interested in his diaries or memoir to study the BMA or his role within it. Written, therefore, primarily for himself and his family, Peter's compositions are refreshingly honest and straightforward.

Not only were his diaries written as the events described took place, but Peter was not one to toe the party line. Within the BMA, he was an outsider by professional formation and personal conviction – he also had an axe to grind. Yes, Peter was a middle-class Briton with a public school education, extensive experience in the Middle East and the ability to speak conversational Arabic – all similar to his superiors – but he was not a trained Arabist administrator with an Oxbridge pedigree.³ The BMA's upper echelons were dominated by former Sudan Political Service men who harboured romantic ideas about the Sanussiyya, indirect rule, 'pure' desert Arabs, and the natural kinship between Briton and Bedouin.⁴ Among these ideologues, Mohammed al-Mahdi Idris al-Sanussi presented himself as the archetypical 'natural leader'. Lacking

³ Peter Synge was one of six sons from a once prominent Anglo-Irish family with an ecclesiastical tradition. Peter and all his brothers attended King's School Bruton in Somerset, yet Peter was the only one not to proceed afterwards to Oxbridge. Poor performance in school exams led the family to conclude he might benefit from a 'fresh start' in the colonies. His black sheep status relative to both his school and familial environments might have led him to feeling underappreciated, resentful towards authority and an 'outsider' – all psychological traits which came out in his interactions and reflections in Cyrenaica.

⁴ To quote Lord James Rennell of Rodd, who personally played a key role in creating the diplomatic framework for the Anglo-Sanussi relationship as British Ambassador to Italy during WWI and whose son was a key administrator and official historian of the BMA, 'the blood of his [Ahmed Hassanein's] Beduin forefathers made intimacy [with his peers at Oxford] easier since the Briton and the Beduin not infrequently find in one another a certain kinship of instinct which compels mutual regard.' Rennell Rodd, Introduction, A. M. Hassanein Bey, *The Lost Oases*, London, 1925, p14.

the requisite professional formation and outlook, Peter did not fully share this matrix of ideas, but was in a position to witness them from up close. He was therefore the best kind of eyewitness: an insider's outsider. Moreover, Peter bore many personal grievances against his superiors and out of professional frustration deliberately critiqued the underlying assumptions of the BMA. This ensemble of factors lends a uniqueness to Peter's voice which is, perforce, entirely absent in the official correspondence of the BMA.

Due to his feelings of exclusion and under-appreciation, Peter was deeply disaffected and confrontational in his dealings with his superiors. His marginalisation speaks volumes about how the imperial ethos constructed a monolithic narrative and necessitated personal conformity from its functionaries. Therefore, although not the voice of a colonised Libya struggling with the complexity of her colonised identity, Peter Synge's 'voice' is nonetheless an authentically subaltern one.

To best showcase that voice, Richard Synge has organised this volume in an original fashion, interlacing sections of commentary and historical background with the blow-by-blow accounts from Peter Synge's diaries and memoir. This approach makes the volume accessible to the scholar and lay reader alike. For the lay reader, Richard's succinct yet careful presentation of the history surrounding the BMA transforms the diary entries into a gripping story that provides insights into the larger political and social phenomena of the BMA. For the scholar, this 'light-touch' approach to editing, allows the reader to reconstruct the inner workings of the BMA without any over-editing, theorising, or cherry-picking by the author inhibiting the reader's direct engagement with the primary material.

From my vantage point as someone who has pored over tens of thousands of BMA documents at the British National Archives at Kew and guided Richard through the relevant War Office and Foreign Office files, Peter's diary and memoir provide a novel form of confirmation concerning the centrality of the Anglo-Sanussi relationship as the focal point for British attempts to govern Cyrenaica.⁵ Peter's accounts also

⁵ The Anglo-Sanussi relationship was a diplomatic and political reality, with deep economic, administrative, personal and ideological roots predating the British conquest of Cyrenaica by over half a century. My forthcoming book, provisional title *Britain's Informal Empire in Libya? The Anglo-Sanussi Relationship, 1882-1969*, Hurst & Co, 2017, will explore in depth the origins, evolution and impact of the Anglo-Sanussi relationship on British policy towards Cyrenaica.

stress how the relationship was constructed out of a web of disparate personal connections and yet operated as an integral whole with its own psychology, aspirations, romance, initiation rituals and shibboleths. This volume shows how the senior figures of the BMA were truly obsessed with cultivating Sayyid Mohammed Idris as the figurehead for their project of indirect rule in Cyrenaica.

While Idris remained in exile in Egypt, the British governed with his blessing, and when opposition arose, they needed him to return to Cyrenaica so that he could first mediate with its inhabitants on behalf of the British government, and later rule Cyrenaica directly, in a way that was legitimate to the populace and would also protect Western interests. To believe wholeheartedly that a combination of Idris and the notables of the *sa'ada* tribes⁶ was the only way that Cyrenaica should be governed, an upper-level BMA official needed to be enamoured with Idris and the Sanussiyya, and to have an Orientalist's vision of Cyrenaica's 'pure Arab tribes'.⁷ The political irrelevance of the urban population, along with the Sanussiyya's default pre-eminence in Cyrenaica and their loyalty to the British imperial cause, formed 'articles of faith' for the 'official mind' of the BMA; questioning them, as Peter Syngé did, was tantamount to heresy.

To acquire this 'proper' belief system, a British official needed to be predisposed to it by the 'correct' professional formation. This theme is excellently demonstrated by Richard Syngé in Chapters 8, 9 and 10, where he discusses the Sanussi Settlement Scheme, an impracticable

⁶ The *sa'ada* are tribes not in a client status to any other tribe and claim to be able to trace their genealogy back to the 11th-century Ibn Hillal invasions of Arabian nomads. The Sanussiyya, as outsiders to the Cyrenaican tribal system, tended to draw their upper-level functionaries from the *sa'ada* tribes. The BMA also preferred to reinforce rather than challenge pre-existing tribal hierarchies. For more on the origins of the *sa'ada* tribes and their unique positions in Cyrenaica society and the BMA consult Emrys L. Peters's *The Bedouin of Cyrenaica: Studies in Corporate Power*, Cambridge, 1990.

⁷ In his *Cyrenaica Handbooks Part VIII: The Tribes and Their Divisions* (an internal War Office publication of 1943 available at the National Archives in FO 371/46112), Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard draws on texts concerning the Ibn Hillal invasions of the 11th century to concur with eminent French Orientalist, Louis Massignon, that the Arabs of Cyrenaica are of four-fifths purity of Arab blood – a higher proportion than he postulates for those of Palestine, Iraq or Syria. 'Culturally they are Arab. Indeed, they are as completely Arabised as any people in the world, Tamim and Quraish not excepted.' p1. This conception is repeated later frequently in internal BMA documents and may explain why prevailing notions about peninsular Arabs are applied to Cyrenaicans but not to Tripolitarians who were viewed as Arabo-Berbers. These racial notions made Cyrenaica fit for the implementation of an Arab princely state akin to Jordan, Kuwait and the Trucial States, which also were viewed in British Arabist circles as possessing a high proportion of 'pure' Arab blood. For more on this theme, see Jason Pack, 'British State-Building in Cyrenaica during the War Years (1941–45)', MSt dissertation, Oxford University, 2011.

plan to transplant the exiled Sanussiyya back into Cyrenaica as a form of landed nobility. That the Sanussiyya, a family of itinerant Sufi scholars, were manifestly ill-suited for such an endeavour and would form a poor basis for creating a modern state structure in Cyrenaica should have been quite clear to any neutral observer. Yet, the ideas behind the Sanussi Settlement Scheme were perfectly in keeping with the prevailing Orientalism and ‘Ornamentalism’⁸ that characterised the ‘official mind’ of the experienced Arabist administrators of the BMA. Peter Synge saw through the BMA’s blind spots: for speaking truth to power, he was eventually dismissed.

Peter’s experience reveals that British administrators who lacked an Arabist and Sudan Political Service background were unable to ‘naturally understand’ the psychological and emotional rationale of the Anglo–Sanussi relationship, and nor were they able to grasp why Britain should make so many compromises to govern Cyrenaica indirectly through the Sanussiyya. A further demonstration of this psychological drama within the BMA is the reception given to Brigadier J. W. N. Haugh, a career soldier without any Arabic skills. Appointed at the war’s end as Cyrenaica’s Chief Administrator, he was quickly reviled by both his staff and his Cyrenaican interlocutors. His sin was to disregard the very fundamentals of the Anglo–Sanussi relationship.

In viewing Richard Synge’s historical glosses through the lens of the Anglo–Sanussi relationship, the two-sidedness of this personal and political connection emerges: key protagonists in the BMA rarely faulted Idris personally for his demands for money, threats to withdraw from political life, or even direct attacks on the British administration. Instead, they directed any criticisms at members of Idris’s entourage, like Omar Sheneib. Conversely, Idris frequently used his pro-British credentials and shrewd negotiating tactics to secure his goals, similar to Nuri Al-Said’s behaviour as Prime Minister in Iraq in the 1940s and 1950s. Idris knew that the nascent administrative machinery in Cyrenaica required his approval or even his physical presence to function properly and hence he drove an increasingly hard bargain with the British to achieve his personal and national objectives. The necessity of Idris’s collaboration is manifest in Richard’s acute observation that

⁸ See D. Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw their Empire*, London, 2001, for a definition and discussion of the neologism ‘Ornamentalism’, which roughly equates to the particularly Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian proclivity of the British upper and upper-middle class to envision non-European societies as containing versions of feudal, hierarchical and aristocratic features, as English society was increasingly losing those features.

from the end of the war until Idris's permanent return to Cyrenaica in late 1947, the position of the British declined precipitously. This volume shows that the British administrators were hamstrung by the international high politics surrounding the fate of Italy's former colonies, which prevented pro-Sanussi BMA administrators from simply creating the client state they envisioned until after the United Nations decisions of 1949. Unfortunately for modern-day scholars, Peter Synge was summarily transferred to Eritrea in 1947 and we cannot benefit from his insights into the crucial years of 1949–51, when the United Kingdom of Libya was cobbled together by UN Commissioner Adrian Pelt and the British around Sayyid Mohammed Idris.

For those fascinated by more than just high politics, the diary excerpts (more so than the memoir) allow the reconstruction of Libyan social mores prior to the country's rapid urbanisation and conservative turn following the discovery of oil in 1959. The diaries are replete with choice anecdotes: British administrators having to close an 'Oriental café' because too many Libyans were drinking and causing social disturbances; drunk American troops cavorting with and molesting Libyan women; Libyan women who danced publicly in front of mixed audiences while veiled; the rare occurrence of a Libyan prostitute who specialised in catering to the tastes of the occupying forces becoming embroiled in a web of jealousy and blackmail –juxtaposed against the existence of a successful girl's school in Benghazi at a time when overall literacy rates in Cyrenaica were less than 10 per cent.

These various insights into Libyan society are perhaps inevitably outnumbered by the diaries' extensive coverage of life in the British Officers' Mess. The BMA's insularity was truly paradigmatic and the sense of British racial and cultural supremacy was as yet unharmed by the setbacks Britain had suffered on the international stage. For Peter, games of bridge and tots of whisky appear not so much as diversions from the gruelling duties of administration, but as reaffirmations of his identity in a strange and foreign land. The social dysfunctionality and trauma of many of the main British participants, such as Peter Synge and Bill Bailey, expose quite clearly the myth of the innate British talent for governance of 'native peoples'. Although the diaries are written in dry and unsentimental prose, the psychological complexity of both Libyan society and the British Officers' Mess simply leaps off the pages.

Reading Peter Syngé's reminiscences in the memoirs with the benefit of hindsight, we see that the 1940s represented a time of great flux for Libya, not only politically and economically, but in terms of social mores, regional identities and attitudes towards Europeans. Following the narrative account presented in the diaries and memoirs, we see that in the span of a few years the British were transformed from liberators to occupiers in the eyes of much of the populace. We also discover that the history of the British Military Administration of Cyrenaica, like most episodes of human history, was not simply an arena for the interplay of impersonal military or ideological forces, but rather a forum for a psychological drama among various protagonists – struggling to understand other cultures, to cope with slights to their honour and to fulfil their duties to conscience and country.

Jason Pack, Cambridge, 2014