

The Marshes of Southern Iraq

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THE MARSHES OF SOUTHERN IRAQ

The object of this letter is to commend Mr. C. J. Edmonds' review of Mr. Gavin Maxwell's book on the marshes of southern Iraq, of which I have unfortunately not yet been able to procure a copy. Without any question whatever Thesiger is the master of all marsh lore and the outstanding authority on all matters concerning the Ma'dan: having spent some fifteen months among them between 1950 and 1954, though he has written remarkably little on the subject. He did well to have a professional writer with him on the occasion which produced 'A reed shaken by the wind,' evidently an excellent account of their joint adventure. Edmonds does equally well in quashing the author's claim "that the journey . . . was through an almost unexplored land about which only two other Europeans know anything very much." Thesiger who, as Edmonds points out, "has made no such claim," is obviously one of them. Who was the other? Perhaps S. E. Hedgcock, but surely his wife must be included with him, and that makes three. So perhaps he was thinking of C. E. Corry, the policeman-novelist of the Muntafiq. The trouble with all these people, including A. T. Wilson whose 'South-west Persia' has no map at all, is that they have not made, or published, anything that one can seriously call a map of the area. The map appearing with Thesiger's article in the *Journal* of September 1954 leaves much to be desired; and I have not been able to consult the works of Buxton, Dowson, Lady Drower and van Ess, to which Edmonds refers as containing incidental information on these marshes. The G.S.G.S. Million sheet for Basra dismisses the 'Amara marshes as "unsurveyed," without a single place-name in 1945! The 1942 (1 : 253,440) map referred to by Edmonds does not seem to help much with the eastern marshes, though I have not seen it myself. The G.S.G.S. (No. 2563) Million map of 1907 (corrected to 1916) shows the Turco-Persian boundary, and gives some information about places on the Persian side (Huwaiza, Busaitin, Thaila and Umm Chir, etc.) but certainly suggests that the marshes proper were unexplored up to 1916. A Turkish map of 1909 does not help at all beyond the tails of the Tigris left bank canals. But the most interesting of all the maps covering the marsh area is an undated one "for official use only," which appears to have been based on an aerial photographic survey, subsequently worked on by surveyors (not named and probably Indian) of the I.E.F. "D" Basra Survey Party, under the command of Colonel F. W. Pirrie. At any rate a few elevations and depths of water are shown under 1916 dates, though there is nothing to suggest a systematic survey of the area on the surface, as all the data given are for spots easy of access by way of the Tigris canals. A serious shortcoming of this map is that, although by far the greater part of the marshes lies within the Mesopotamian frontier, at least two-thirds of the area is left blank. Be that as it may, the scale of the map is 1 : 253,400 (4 miles to the inch), and it appears to have been printed about April 1917.

Edmonds refers to A. T. Wilson as skirting the marshes "on the east, just in Persia," as a member of the Turco-Persian Boundary Commission of that year. But that scarcely does him justice, as he had prepared himself for the boundary work by extensive exploration, as he tells us ("South-west Persia," p. 218) in a letter to his parents, dated 28 June 1912: "I am back in Muhammara after three weeks surveying of the quite unknown desert country and *marshes between Ahwaz and 'Amara*, and the desert between Basra and Huwaiza. . . . In the marshes I sometimes waded naked, in the sun, sometimes swam the creeks with men carrying my plane-table and notebooks, my dumpy level and staves. Sometimes I went about in a little *mashhuf*, made of reeds, coated with pitch. . . . They are made with very long, tall prows which cleave the reeds, and are poled by half-naked Arabs with long reeds through a maze of narrow passages. . . ." There is no reason to suppose that Wilson reached 'Amara, and he does not tell us how far he got across the marshes in that direction, or record any place visited by him: but there can be no doubt that he did serious survey work in the marsh area and saw the normal life of its inhabitants. He was apparently the

first European to do so! And, during the boundary commission's work, Wilson went with Colonel Ryder (in charge of the survey) from Ahwaz to Kut Saiyid 'Ali on the Karkha river, whence they went in *mashhufs* down the river to Khafajiya and Busaitin, "a town of reed huts built just below water-level, a little ledge of mud sufficing to keep the water from flooding the huts." From here they visited Umm Chir and Thaila by land (?), and went later, by boat, via Makariya and Shammariya to Shuwaiyib, some seventeen miles north-west of Huwaiza, to which Wilson walked *en route* for Ahwaz, while we do not know what Colonel Ryder did after leaving him at Shuwaiyib.

So much for Wilson, who must surely be regarded as the first explorer of the Haur al Huwaiza or Haur al 'Adhim. Edmonds does not mention his companion on the boundary commission, G. E. Hubbard, the author of 'From the Gulf to Ararat,' a popular account of the boundary commission's work. He also visited Busaitin and Umm Chir by *mashhuf*, but his personal experience of the marshes was slight.

Hubbard tells us that in about 1837 Huwaiza was a flourishing town of some 30,000 inhabitants, but that in that year the Karkha river changed its course, with the result that the town "rapidly declined . . . to a tenth of its size" and is now (1914) "little more than a village." The only other fact I know about Huwaiza was recorded in my 'Sa'udi Arabia' (p. 27) as follows: ". . . in 1696 Basra was attacked and captured, possibly with Persian aid and certainly in the Persian interest, by Farajallah ibn Muttalib, the chief of the Marsh Arabs of al Huwaiza. The latter in turn was evicted from the district by the Turks in 1699. . . ."

Another marsh-traveller whom Edmonds ignores is myself! In my 'Arabian days' (pp. 120-1) I wrote a very brief account of my journey by *mashhuf* from 'Amara through the midst of the marshes to Suwaib on the Shatt al 'Arab; and in my 'Forty years in the wilderness' (p. 96) I published one of my photographs of a typical marsh village (Baidha Nawafil).

H. ST. J. B. PHILBY

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

16 June 1958

Mr. C. J. Edmonds writes in reply:

Philby was, of course, one of the "administering political officers" I mention in the review; and the brief references to the marshes in his books must come under "other accounts which a little research would trace." But I am sorry it did not occur to me to look up his various publications, to add to the list. I might perhaps have made more of A. T. Wilson's explorations on the Persian side, or at least given the reference to his 'South-west Persia.' But neither he nor Hubbard (I looked up both) have very much in the way of description of the marshes proper.

Quite a number of us must have notes of journeys similar to Philby's. I still have mine, of a north to south journey through the central marsh in May, 1916—thus seven months before Philby!—as well as of later journeys through all three marshes, which I hope to use one day.

The 1942 map to which I referred is the revised version of the 1917 sheet on the same scale, which Philby describes as "the most interesting of all the maps;" it has much new detail west of the Tigris but, as he correctly guessed, nothing new on the east.

C. J. EDMONDS

Heronden,

Hawkhurst, Kent

5 July 1958

ARCTIC "VEGETATION ARCS"

Vegetation arcs to which Professor Ross Mackay refers in his letter in the June 1958 issue of the *Journal*, are widespread not only in Arctic and Sub-Arctic Canada but also in northern Europe and Asia. Such patterns cover much larger areas (often many