

MAD MITCH'S TRIBAL LAW

ADEN AND THE
END OF EMPIRE

AARON EDWARDS

'A masterly and evocative portrait...this book could not be more timely'

Toby Harnden, Sunday Times

About the Book

Aden, 20 June 1967: two army Land Rovers burn ferociously in the midday sun. The bodies of British soldiers litter the road. Thick black smoke bellows above Crater town, home to insurgents who are fighting the British-backed Federation government. Crater had come to symbolise Arab nationalist defiance in the face of the world's most powerful empire.

Hovering 2,000 ft. above the smouldering destruction, a tiny Scout helicopter surveys the scene. Its passenger is the recently arrived Commanding Officer of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, Lieutenant-Colonel Colin Mitchell. Soon the world's media would christen him 'Mad Mitch', in recognition of his controversial reoccupation of Crater two weeks later.

Mad Mitch was truly a man out of his time. Supremely self-confident and debonair, he was an empire builder, not dismantler, and railed against the national malaise he felt had gripped Britain's political establishment. Drawing on a wide array of never-before-seen archival sources and eyewitness testimonies, *Mad Mitch's Tribal Law* tells the remarkable story of inspiring leadership, loyalty and betrayal in the final days of British Empire. It is, above all, a shocking account of Britain's forgotten war on terror.

CONTENTS

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

Maps

Introduction

Prologue

1. The Sons of Yafa'

2. A Letter from King Hussein

3. Turning a Blind Eye

4. State of Emergency

5. Who Dares Wins

6. Little England Takes a Soft Line

7. Killing Sir Arthur Charles

8. Egyptian Intrigue

9. Britain's Guantanamo

10. Trimming the Ship

11. Calling Britain's Bluff

12. Mutiny

13. Imperial Hubris

14. The Tipping Point

15. Operation Stirling Castle

16. Bagpipes in Crater

17. Mad Mitch's Tribal Law

18. The Tomb of Sheikh Othman

19. Aden – Graveyard for the British?

20. A Man of Destiny

21. Last of the Praetorians

Epilogue

Picture Section

Acknowledgements

Notes

Dramatis Personae

Glossary and List of Abbreviations

Select Bibliography

Index

About the Author

Copyright

MAD MITCH'S TRIBAL LAW

AARON EDWARDS

‘The superiority of Aden is in its excellent harbours, both to the E. and to the W.; and the importance of such a station, offering, as it does, a secure shelter for shipping, an almost impregnable fortress, and an easy access to the rich provinces of Hadramaut and Yemen, without the long voyage to Mokhá, is too evident to require to be insisted on.’

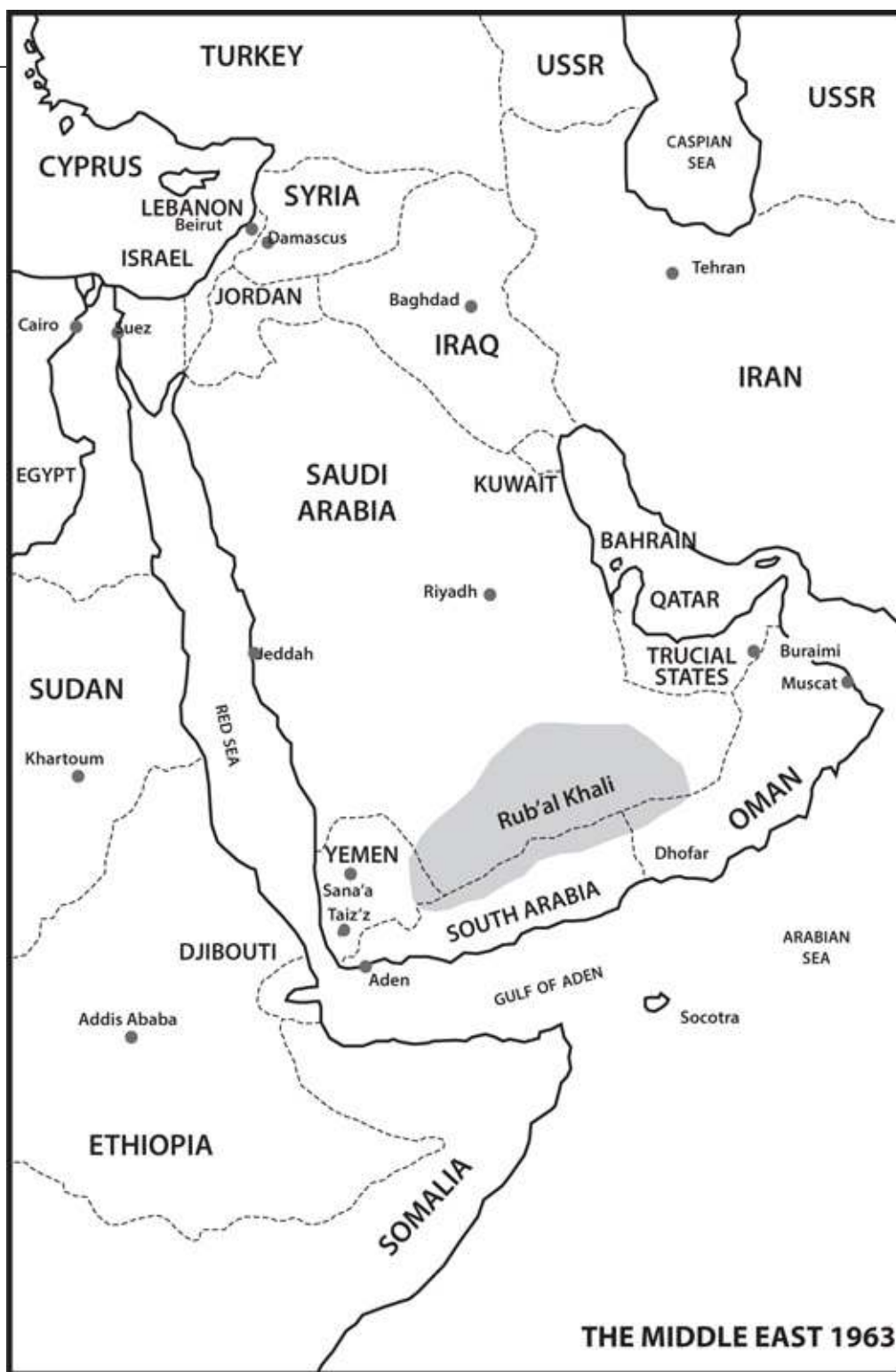
– Captain S.B. Haines, Indian Navy, communicated by the Court of Directors of the East India Company, February 1839

‘I weighed the English army in my mind, and could not honestly assure myself of them. The men were often gallant fighters, but their generals as often gave away in stupidity what they had gained in ignorance.’

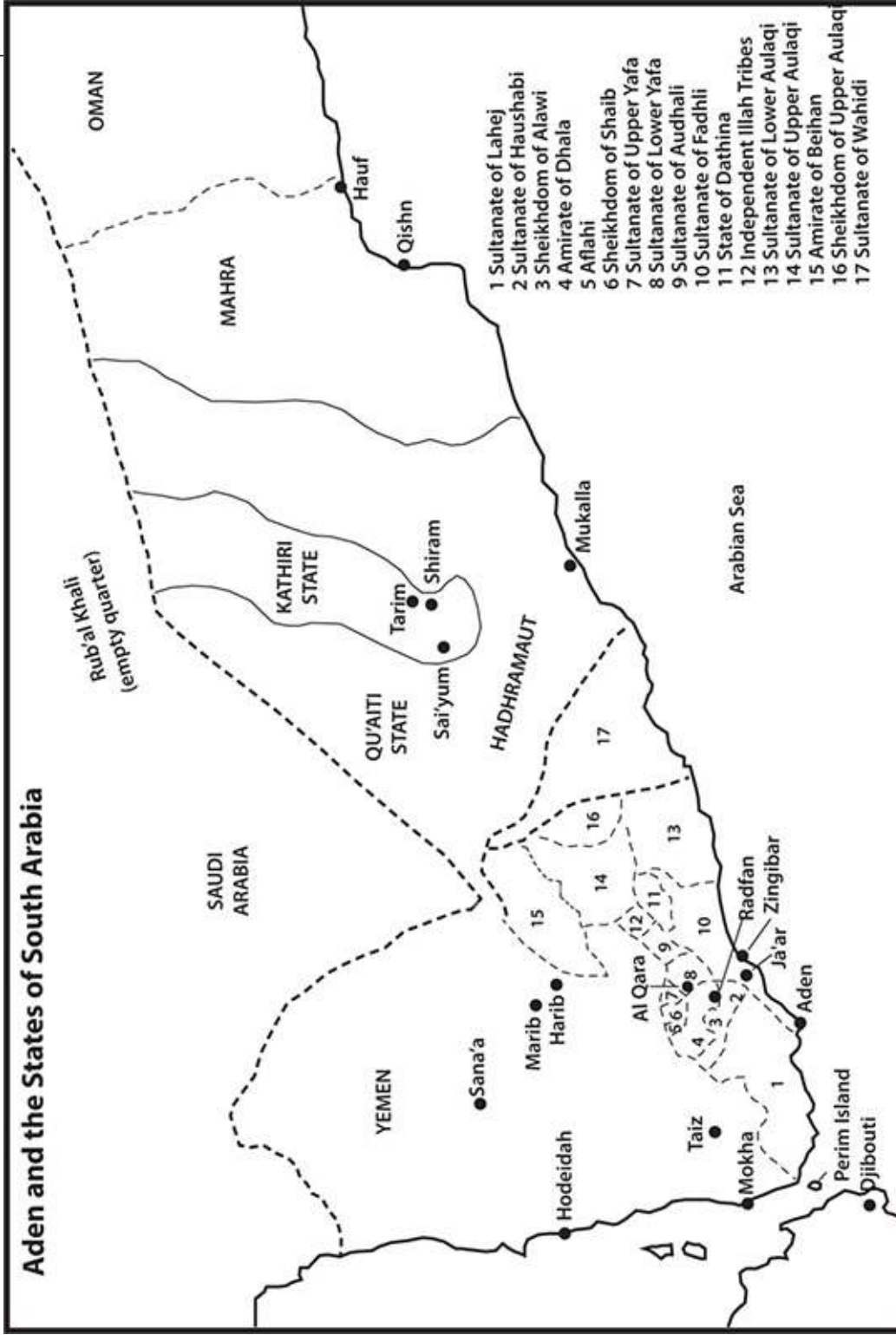
– T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (1926)

‘The British Empire, assembled over two centuries and dismantled in two decades, will survive a little longer in memory.’

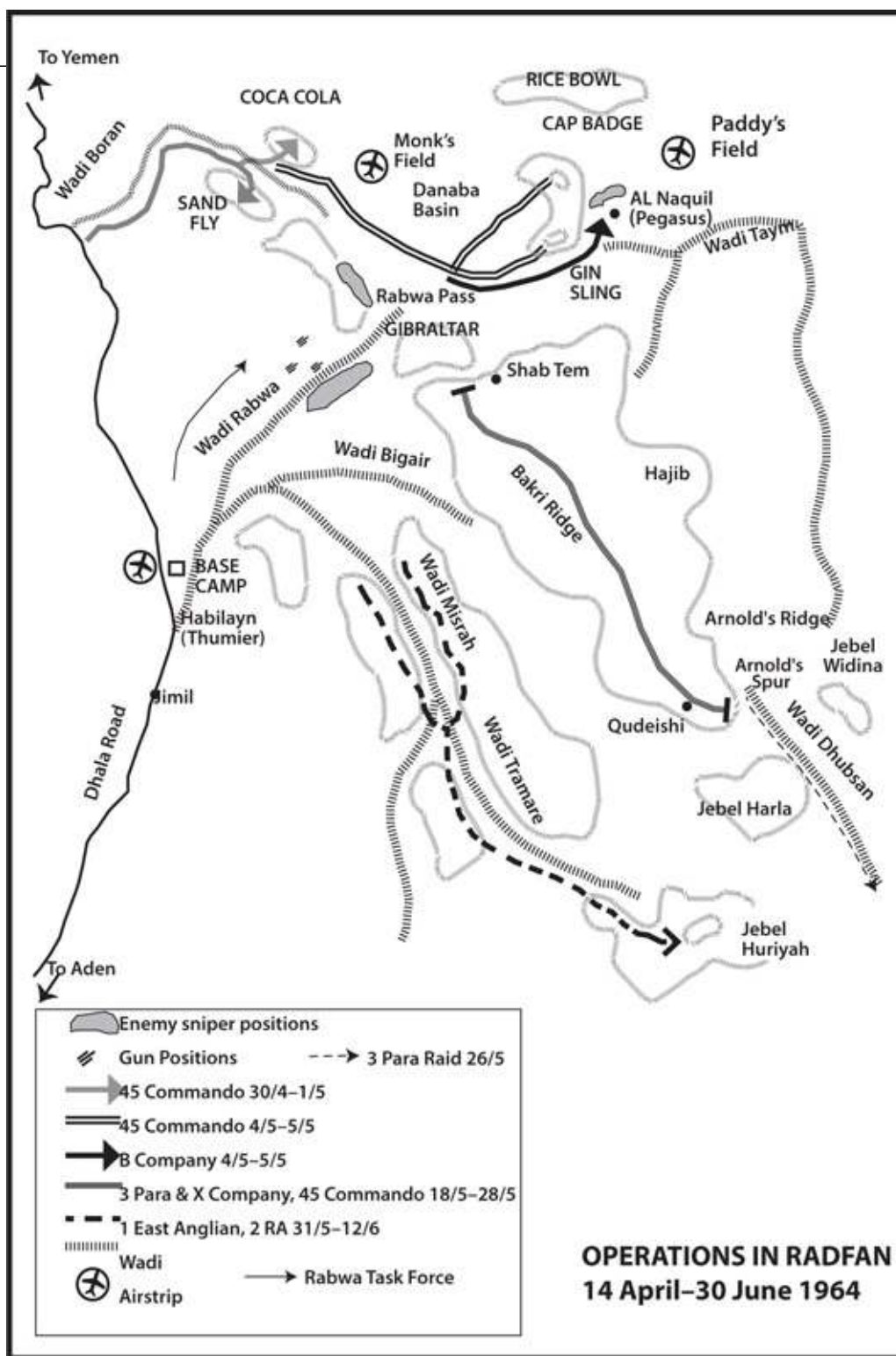
Tom Pocock, *East and West of Suez: The Retreat from Empire* (1986)

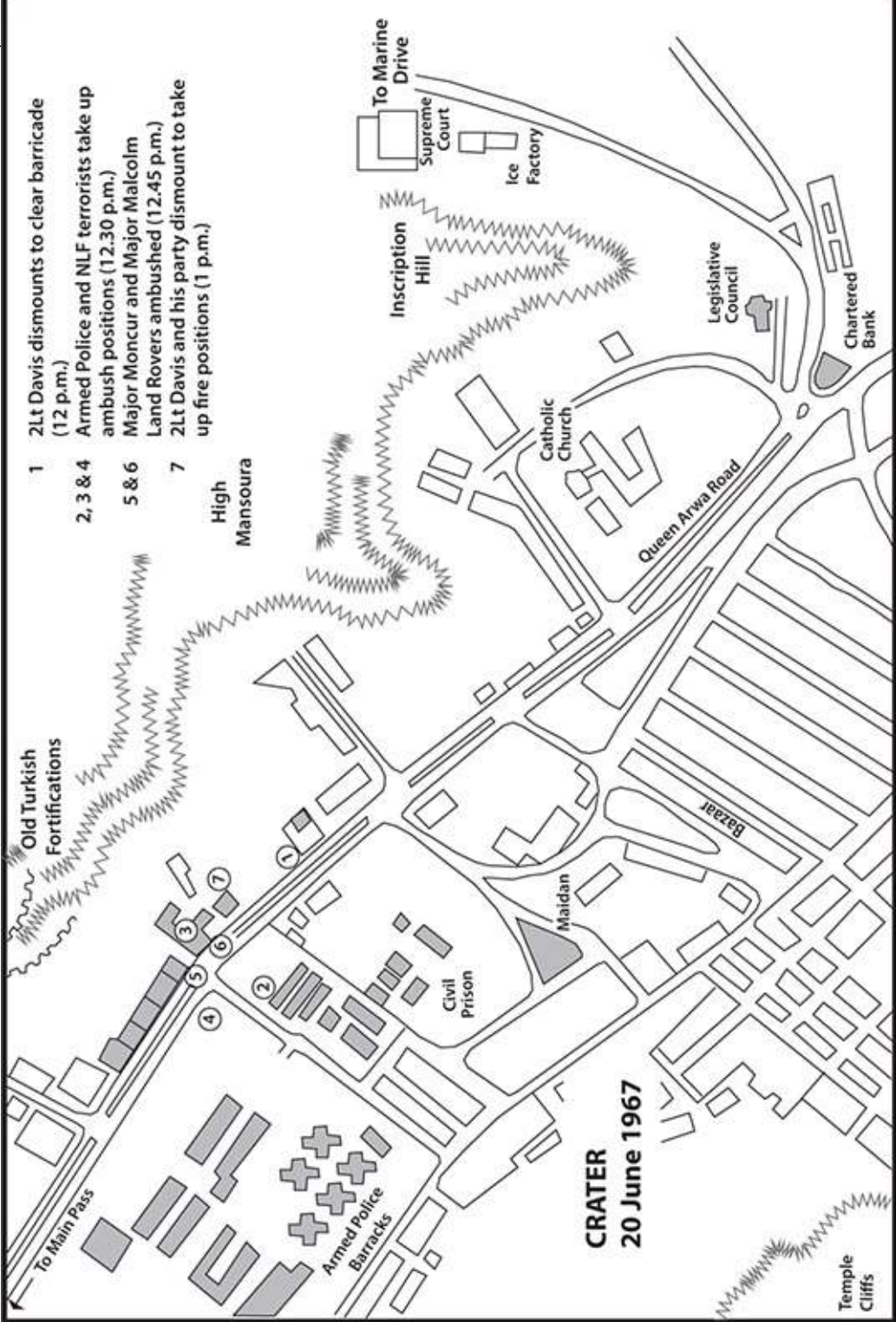


Aden and the States of South Arabia



- 1 Sultanate of Lahej
- 2 Sultanate of Haushabi
- 3 Sheikhdom of Alawi
- 4 Amirate of Dhala
- 5 Aflahi
- 6 Sheikhdom of Shaib
- 7 Sultanate of Upper Yafa
- 8 Sultanate of Lower Yafa
- 9 Sultanate of Audhali
- 10 Sultanate of Fadhl
- 11 State of Dathina
- 12 Independent Illah Tribes
- 13 Sultanate of Lower Aulaqi
- 14 Sultanate of Upper Aulaqi
- 15 Amirate of Beihan
- 16 Sheikhdom of Upper Aulaqi
- 17 Sultanate of Wahidi





INTRODUCTION

BRITAIN ONCE HAD an empire over which the sun famously never set. Stretching from the wilds of Canada to the barren deserts and deep wadis of South Arabia and beyond to the tropical jungles of India in the subcontinent, Britannia really did rule the waves. By the late 1960s, however, Britain's imperial role had all but ceased and its vast empire had crumbled away. This was thanks in part to indigenous populations rising up and demanding independence, though the ending of an East of Suez role by 1971 can also be attributed to the policies of post-war Labour governments that embraced decolonisation as a point of principle in lieu of the political will and economic resources to maintain an overseas empire.

Even though it took two centuries to build up the largest empire the world has ever seen it was dismantled in an inordinately short amount of time. In little over two decades, British imperial holdings had all but vanished, with the exception of a tiny handful of islands and continental footholds in the Americas, Europe and Asia.

This book asks how and why that happened by adopting a 'worm's-eye view' of the end of empire from one of the last colonies to fall: Aden, now part of Yemen, which lay at the juncture where the Red Sea meets the Indian Ocean. It details the political, socio-economic and military dimensions of the Aden adventure, rescuing from obscurity the contributions made by those who administered and enforced British rule, as well as the actions of the many Arabs who collaborated with, or directly challenged, sometimes violently, the world's most powerful empire.

Historians of empire have generally shied away from telling the story of Britain's role in the Middle East, with several notable exceptions.¹ This is all the more curious given its reputation as the crossroads where the old and new worlds meet. Aden offered a strategic base from which Britain could project its military power while protecting the key commercial arteries of empire, particularly India, and was the first colony to be acquired in the wake of the accession of Queen Victoria.

The Bombay government dispatched a force to Aden – then a tiny fishing village of 600 inhabitants – to secure its cession from the rule of the Sultan of Lahej. On 19 January 1839, British naval forces bombarded the village, reducing it to rubble. After parleying with the Sultan, a British naval officer, Captain S.B. Haines, wrested control of Aden and set about integrating it into the wider imperial system, while the Sultan and his family retreated to their grand whitewashed palace in Lahej.

Aden grew from its humble beginnings as a coaling station to become one of the largest bunkering ports in the empire by the mid twentieth century, ranking behind only London and Liverpool.² Its significance reached its peak after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 but then declined after India gained independence in 1947 and as a result of the Suez Crisis in 1956, when the Canal temporarily closed – causing shipping traffic to drop by a staggering 80 per cent. By the mid 1960s, amidst austere economic constraints and a permanent shift away from maritime-based grand strategy, the London government had decided to release Aden and its hinterland from the arthritic grip of its ailing overseas empire, though they wished to choose their ruling successors and in doing so somehow stem the rising tide of Arab nationalism.

A shift in Britain's international outlook was matched at home by dramatic social change. In April 1966, *Time* Magazine labelled London a 'swinging city' as Britons grooved to the sounds of The Beatles, The Who and the Rolling Stones. In the second half of the decade, disposable income, free love and experimental drugs became defining aspects of the lifestyles of many young men and women as the first post-war baby-boomer generation came of age. 'Personal liberation and social liberation thus went hand in hand,' opined historian Eric Hobsbawm, 'the most obvious ways of shattering the

bonds of state, parental and neighbours' power, law and convention, being sex and drugs.'³ Rigid social conventions were shrugged off in a blur of miniskirts, LSD, pop music and the onset of frivolous gambling in betting shops, bingo halls and casinos.

It was also a time of political radicalisation, particularly as aspiring public intellectuals found cerebral nourishment in the worldview offered by communism. Street activism became almost recreational, as young people marched to the beat of such diverse issues as civil rights for African Americans and opposition to the US bombing of the Vietnamese cities of Hanoi and Haiphong. Crowds swelled in Western capital cities to protest against the increasingly divisive policies of President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration. Great change was in motion.

Three and a half thousand miles away from the carefree indulgences of London, in the sweaty and dusty depths of South Arabia, what veteran *Daily Express* reporter Stephen Harper called 'Britain's Vietnam' went virtually unnoticed. In the words of celebrated journalist Bernard Levin, 'Britain had once held dominion over palm and pine, and now every palm and pine concealed a sniper, determined that the British should leave.'⁴ The scene was set for the last battles of a once-great empire. Here, in the last sliver of imperial real estate in the Middle East, British troops fought Egyptian-backed insurgents and terrorists in the urban jungles of Crater, Sheikh Othman and Ma'ala. And they also engaged a tough enemy at close quarters in perilous skirmishes in the rugged mountains of the Radfa which bordered the Yemen Arab Republic, a state born out of the turbulence of a *coup d'état* against the ruling Imam in late September 1962.

Unlike earlier Arabian odysseys – captured by the raw honesty of literary giants like Rudyard Kipling: 'Old Aden, like a barrack-stove/that no one's lit for years an' years!', Evelyn Waugh, and feted wartime adventurer Lord Belhaven – this one pitted organised Western armed forces, backed by jet-age technology, against primitive yet battle-hardened tribesmen. In bringing first-world order to third-world chaos, troops from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland fought against Arab terrorism and insurgency. But while they were armed with the latest military equipment and advanced thinking on guerrilla warfare, these British soldiers could do little to counter the incessant harangues emanating from Cairo Radio, a propaganda organ crackling with frenzied, hate-filled rants. Arabs everywhere were being goaded into throwing off the yoke of British imperialism.

By 1967, Britain's small war in South Arabia was nearing an endgame. In the narrow back alleys of inner-city Crater, a town perched inside the jagged peaks of an extinct volcano, there unfolded an extraordinary story of a forgotten war on terrorism. There was much at stake in these final battles of empire. On the one hand, the London government was anxious to keep up appearances by withdrawing its armed forces whilst maintaining British prestige. On the other hand, the world's two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States, waited in the wings, eager to fill any vacuum Britain left behind. With the onset of political malaise, one man – a soldier – stepped into the breach. An unlikely legend was born in the form of Lieutenant-Colonel Colin Mitchell, or as the world's media would soon christen him: 'Mad Mitch'.

Mad Mitch's popularity with the British people grew as the empire shrivelled. It was his robust retaking of Crater in early July 1967 – a strategic prize that had fallen into the hands of ruthless terrorists two weeks earlier – that earned him widespread praise. On 3 July he led his men, the 1st Battalion Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, into Crater to the sound of their regimental pipes. Crater would be held in the tight grip of 'Argyll Law' until British withdrawal in late November 1967. What happened in Aden during this time would become synonymous with the actions of Mad Mitch and the Argylls.

The Argylls' seizure of Crater captured the popular imagination. But it was the photogenic persona of Colin Mitchell, perhaps the most unlikely hero in Britain's end-of-empire story, who steadied the country's nerves as it went through an enormous transformation. One of Colonel Mitchell's closest

comrades thought that the Argylls' CO had 'raised the banner once more and put the great back into Great Britain'.⁵ His actions unquestionably gave hope to those who felt a keen sense of responsibility for the empire they had built, administered and protected, and who were now suffering from a profound sense of despondency. Fleet Street journalist Bernard Levin came closest to capturing this feeling when he wrote: 'Britain, during the Sixties, seemed to be so desperately in need of heroes that she was willing to accept even fake ones, even criminal ones.'⁶ Whether he liked it or not, Colin Mitchell became a central character in the unfolding drama that would see the curtain finally fall on *Pax Britannica*.

Mad Mitch's Tribal Law explores the roots of the Mad Mitch myth. Was Colin Mitchell a Lawrence of Arabia figure? Did he think of himself as such? And what did he actually do to earn an indelible place in Britain's end-of-empire story? It asks what the Argylls achieved in the summer of 1967 and whether British troops in Aden really understood the tribal law of the society in which they found themselves soldiering.

But there is another reason why it is important to piece together what happened in Aden in the 1960s, for it had far-reaching repercussions for Britain's standing in the world. The Labour Government's decision to withdraw from South Arabia would have longer-term consequences, most of which we are still living with today. Is it possible, for instance, to make the case that Yemen's current instability, its precarious political transition and the violence unleashed by Islamist terrorists, has roots in Britain's forgotten war on terror?

Mad Mitch's Tribal Law situates the story of Colin Mitchell and the Argylls in the wider context of Britain's enduring interests in the Middle East. In this sense it is more than military history, broadening the perspective to encompass the political and strategic decisions made in Aden, London, Cairo, Washington, Moscow and Sana'a that had an ultimate bearing on the ground in this Middle East outpost. In assembling the most extensive array of primary sources from archives in London, Oxford, Manchester and elsewhere, along with the eyewitness accounts of those who played a key role in Britain's South Arabian adventure, this book pieces together a remarkable story of bravery in the face of insurmountable odds. Above all, this is a timeless story of inspiring leadership, loyalty and betrayal in the final days of empire.

PROLOGUE

JUNE 1967

THE EVENING OF Monday, 19 June 1967 was quiet and uneventful. Except for the occasional faint rattle of gunfire somewhere off in the distance, Waterloo Lines, a British military cantonment within the RAF's sprawling Khormaksar airbase, sat peaceful. The camp had been home to the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers for nine months, but their tour of duty was drawing to a close as they prepared to hand over operational responsibility to soldiers from the 1st Battalion Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. Troops relaxed – some playing cards while others watched a screening of the Second World War epic *The Battle of the Bulge* in the camp cinema. A few even enjoyed down time on their bunks, while other, more adventurous, souls braved the stifling humidity to go for a jog.

British forces stationed at Waterloo Lines had become accustomed to a higher state of alertness following an attack on the cinema in January 1965, when 14 people were injured. At the time, servicemen and their families had been relaxing prior to a showing of *Tarzan's Three Challenges*.⁷ After the attack, in which a Mills grenade (a small pineapple-shaped explosive with a seven-second fuse) was lobbed from a passing vehicle carrying several young Arab men, Aden Brigade stepped up security. Thousands of miles of concertina wire was erected round military camps. As a matter of routine, two sentries were posted outside the cinema with explicit instructions to ensure that no local nationals (with the exception of locally-employed NAAFI staff) were to be allowed within 50 yards of the audience.⁸ Sentries were to be on the lookout for suspicious Arabs asking questions about 'the car, habits, house, room, tent of individuals' or, perhaps most suspiciously of all, 'taking photographs'.

Other precautionary measures were in place too. Observation Posts (OPs) – or sangars in military parlance – sat perched at intermittent points around the security network and some were even boxed in with anti-rocket grille-panelling. Permanent vehicle checkpoints (VCPs) sprouted up to control all movement in and out of military installations. Having been an everyday feature of life for many years, troops garrisoned in Aden were fast becoming an unwelcome presence and were a target for Arab nationalist insurgents who had Egyptian backing.

In Little Aden, 18 miles from Waterloo Lines and on the western edge of Aden harbour, Lieutenant Colonel Colin Mitchell, the Argylls' 41-year-old Commanding Officer (CO), was attending a dinner party. He was soon joined by Major-General Philip Tower, the General Officer Commanding (GOC) for the area, and a coterie of other senior officers. At 50, Tower had enjoyed a fairly distinguished career in the Second World War, seeing action at Tobruk, where he earned a Distinguished Service Order (DSO), afterwards spending 15 months in an Italian prisoner-of-war camp before escaping and parachuting into Arnhem and, later, Norway. In contrast, Colin Mitchell began his military career in the last days of the war, thereafter serving in a number of colonial hotspots around the world. Narrowly cheating death twice – once in Italy during mop-up operations in 1945 and again in Palestine – Colin also survived a few close shaves in Korea and Cyprus along the way.

Colin Mitchell was a man of small stature but enormous energy. At 5 ft 7 in. he was as fit as a fiddle, devilishly handsome and charismatic. He exuded a pugnacious, raw honesty. Immaculately dressed, whether on ceremonial duties or in the field, he never had a hair out of place. His pert nose earned him the nickname 'Piggy Mitchell' amongst his men and he spoke with a pronounced middle-class West London accent, clipped and unavoidably blunt. Born into a Scottish Presbyterian family that took duty to both God and country equally seriously, Colin became, at an early age, a firm believer in what he called 'great causes and lost hopes'. A day pupil at Whitgift, Croydon's oldest

public school, Colin was an avid reader of adventure books by famous patriotic pinups like T.E. Lawrence and John Buchan. He had been a self-confessed imperialist since boyhood: 'as familiar with Kabul and the Khyber Pass as I was with Clapham and Kensington,'⁹ he wrote proudly in his memoir. Seemingly bypassing adolescence for adulthood, he duly joined the Home Guard at 15 and enlisted in the regular army in 1943, aged 17.

By his 40th birthday, Colin had already earned his spurs as a fully fledged 'man of action', much like his military hero Lawrence of Arabia, having served in half a dozen warzones and colonial hotspots around the world. Being in the military was like a religion to him. He lived and breathed the army. Every inch the modern British officer, he was appointed CO of the Argylls on 12 January 1967. Not long into the job, he set about moulding the battalion in his own image. An ardent opponent of drunkenness and ill-discipline, Colin was fond of reminding his subordinates of the dangers of decadent behaviour. His opposition to drunkenness sprang not from any moralising zeal (though he did like what moral zealot Malcolm Muggeridge had to say about the pot and pills craze in the 1960s) but from a desire to keep his battalion at the peak of their physical fitness. Colin did not suffer fools gladly and believed in the timeless mantra of 'train hard, fight easy'. Another one of his hobby horse was his attitude towards teamwork. 'The strength of a chain is, unfortunately, its weakest link. We must quickly identify our passengers and subject them to the white heat of professional scrutiny,' he informed his officers on many occasions.¹⁰ A tough, resolute commander, he relished the opportunity to test the mettle of his battalion on operations.

His eagerness to get out on the ground and acquire a fingertip feel for Aden's deteriorating security situation sat at the forefront of his mind. Consequently, he did not adjust well to the jovial facade of formal dinner nights, with all their pointless chat and backslapping. It was an unwelcome distraction, especially as the local State of Emergency was by now well into its fourth year.

After exchanging pleasantries in the usual manner dictated by Mess etiquette, Colin and the other guests turned their conversation to the question of the reliability of the newly created South Arabian Army (SAA). The SAA was an 8,000-strong force that brought together the old Federal Regular Army (FRA) and the Federal National Guard (FNG) under Federal control. The FNG I and II were made up largely of tribal confederations from different states in the Federation of South Arabia that had been formed in 1959. Uncorroborated intelligence had emerged hinting at a conspiracy involving a clique of junior Arab officers who planned to mutiny in protest at the suspension of four more senior Aqids (colonels), including Colonel Haider bin Saleh al-Habili, nephew of Sharif Husain bin Ahmed al-Habili, the powerful and influential ruler of Beihan State. Colonel Haider had earlier come out against the appointment of his more senior colleague Colonel Nasser Bureik al-Aulaqi. Tribal lines were drawn and threatened to unravel the Federation, entirely a creature of British design, which pulled together Aden Colony and a disparate group of 16 other sheikhdoms, amirates and sultanates into a precarious political unit. If it were allowed to fester, trouble in the ranks of the Federal Army would have untold consequences for British interests in south-west Arabia.

All this talk of treachery left Colin feeling cranky. It revived depressing memories of his previous visits to Aden, when he referred to the colony as 'the least buttoned-up place' he had ever seen. On two earlier trips in 1965, he had accompanied Lord Louis Mountbatten, the outgoing Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), and the Labour Secretary of State for Defence Denis Healey. These fact-finding missions took place against the backdrop of increasing hostility towards Britain's continued presence. The situation was a powder-keg upon which the estimated 22,000 British troops and their families rested. Although Colin's visits were brief, he nonetheless 'formed several firm opinions' about the situation in South Arabia.¹¹ His thinking would develop over the next two years and factor significantly in his later actions.

On this his fourth visit to the colony in June 1967, Colin was accompanied by 126 officers and men in an advance party with the explicit task of preparing the ground for the deployment of the remaining 600 Argylls. They were there as observers only, as the main operational duties fell to the Fusiliers. As an incoming battalion commander, Colin chomped at the bit to get stuck into his deployment. Try as he might, he could not relax.

Not long afterwards, the conversation and brandy began to run dry. The host called time and, along with other weary guests, Colin departed for his quarters along the narrow causeway to Waterloo Line. This sliver of road served to connect the Headquarters of 24 Brigade in Little Aden with the vast military cantonments surrounding Khormaksar airbase in Aden proper. Given the sharp increase in terrorist activity, General Tower's Royal Military Police protection detail arranged for a half troop of armoured cars to accompany him back to his residence at Steamer Point, south-west of Khormaksar, something that had not been necessary only a few months earlier. General Tower offered Colin a lift back to Waterloo Lines, giving both men a chance to talk over the Argylls' impending deployment. It also gave Colin the opportunity to size up Tower's intellectual prowess and military aptitude, which he quickly concluded were minimal.

Not long after being dropped off he found himself strolling back to his quarters enveloped by a feeling of impending disaster. Perhaps the Argylls might see some action after all, he thought to himself.

Shortly after 11 p.m., as he retired for the night, Philip Tower's last thoughts were of how the evening had gone incredibly well – it had been an excellent *tour d'horizon* of the colony's finest dining and bridge-playing. This was a lucky break for him, he sighed: a peacetime command with wondrous sun-kissed beaches, balmy afternoons in serene clubs and the chance, perhaps, if he played it cool, for some riding, shooting and sailing as well. Having arrived in Aden equipped with 'an open mind and with no built-in prejudices',¹² five weeks into his new command he was satisfied.

THE SONS OF YAFA'

ON 19 FEBRUARY 1962, a Shackleton bomber took off from RAF Khormaksar, Aden's sprawling military base, for a journey deep inside the South Arabian interior. The mission was codenamed Operation Walpole and it had the primary purpose of conducting a bomb run against dissident tribesmen in Lower Yafa'.

The British could not send in ground troops because it would have been too dangerous and costly. The cheaper option was to impose some kind of order from the air and so it had been common practice since the 1920s for the RAF to drop smaller bombs on military targets, while larger 1,000 lb bombs were reserved for destroying cultivation and to enforce prohibited areas.¹³ It took the Shackleton only 30 minutes to get to its destination. Flying high above the jagged and arid desert floor, the pilots identified their target from a pre-arranged set of coordinates and made their descent.

On the ground, an important meeting was underway between the disparate tribes of Lower Yafa'. Those gathered included Muhsin Hamoud al-Affifi, cousin and loyal lieutenant to the dissident Muhammad Aidrus al-Affifi, estranged brother of Mahmud Aidrus, the Sultan of Lower Yafa' who had been picked by the British to put a tribal face on their administration of the state. The men had gathered as part of a conspiracy against Britain's indirect rule of Lower Yafa'.

Also in attendance was Thabit Munassar al-Armi Yahari, chief of a muktab (sub-section of a tribe) who spoke only to boast about how every time British bombs were dropped his reputation amongst the people of Yafa' al Haid increased. 'I enjoy the bombs like dates and bananas,' he proudly exclaimed, as the Shackleton rumbled overhead.¹⁴ Raising his voice so that he could be heard over the powerful engines, Munassar al-Armi reminded his tribal brothers that 'If our brother Muhammad fails in his mission to bring back weapons and money from Yemen [to fight the British], I will negotiate with government representatives.' All of those in attendance resolved to wait and see what the outcome of Muhammad's mission to Sana'a would be.¹⁵

Glancing out of their windows at the moonlike surface below, the pilots could just about make out tiny specks huddled together in the southern side of a settlement near the remote Yafa' city of al-Qara, a place RAF servicemen had come to know intimately as a result of their countless sorties upcountry. Zeroing in on the figures bobbing about beneath him, the bomb aimer flicked a switch on his console that opened the Shackleton's undercarriage doors. His right index finger hovered deliberately over a firing mechanism. After counting to himself – 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 – he pressed the release button. A 1,000 lb bomb accompanied by several 20 lb bombs fell away beneath him, whistling through the air. A few seconds later, huge explosions pounded the granite terrain below, blowing large clouds of debris across the basin floor. Although they could not see the devastation caused by the bombs, the pilots received a running commentary from the crew member in the tail of the aircraft.¹⁶

The tribesmen were desperate to escape the bombardment. Clearly shaken by the experience, some of them fired their antique SMLE rifles in the air as they scarpered for cover. It had little effect. Thirty-seven Squadron, would fly a total of 23 sorties during this particular phase of Op Walpole, dropping 98 1,000 lb bombs and 472 20 lb bombs in the general vicinity of al-Qara. Aircraft like the Shackleton brought with them devastating firepower and untold psychological effects. Many of the lightly armed tribesmen referred to the experience of being bombed as 'death from the sky'.

On this occasion, the British had successfully disrupted the meeting but failed to totally degrade

Yafa' tribal cohesion. The tribes' hatred of the British was second only to their opposition to those who collaborated with them. After such attacks, tribesmen simply evaporated back into the rugged terrain, vowing to fight another day.

British intelligence on the tribal gathering was excellent. The British Adviser for the Western Aden Protectorate (WAP), Kennedy Trevaskis, had noted in his diary:

We are now told – this time by the Am Shaqqi Sultan – that Mhd Aidrus is due to arrive at Qara tomorrow. This ties up with the information that representatives of all the mukhtabs are getting there today. The purpose of the get-together will possibly be to decide whether to pack it in [stop their dissident activities] or not.¹⁷

Trevaskis had taken the decision two weeks earlier at a meeting of the WAP Security Committee to continue with the bombing campaign in Lower Yafa'. He knew only too well from experience how his superiors in Government House lacked the appetite for a full ground incursion. He wasn't convinced by the ground-forces option himself. What made him angry, however, was the publicity generated by the bombing, which tended to play up the collateral damage of civilian homes. 'I am not afraid of local opinion – our friends approve our action: our enemies would never do so however much we argued.'¹⁸ Though difficult to ascertain the effect the bombing was having in persuading Muhammad Aidrus to abandon his subversive campaign, it would not be the last time the British would try.

Twenty-three-year-old Stephen Day had not been in his job as a Political Officer long when he was tasked by Trevaskis' deputy Robin Young to target Muhammad Aidrus. On one occasion the Hawker Hunter aircraft he dispatched to eliminate the dissident tribal leader came within a hair's breadth of killing him. Despite the RAF dropping leaflets warning him to leave, Muhammad remained defiant. As he cowered in the dark recesses of his tiny stone fort, a Hunter posted a rocket through the window narrowly missing its target. Each Hunter was equipped with frontal cannons that could fire 1,200 rounds of 30 mm high explosive shells per minute and a typical sortie expended around 4,800 rounds. Although wounded, the attack only made Muhammad more determined to continue his armed revolt against the British.

Muhammad Aidrus was a slippery character. British intelligence had been struggling to catch up with him for the last two years, trying all sorts of tactics to locate him, including recruiting spies to intercept travellers passing through the tribal badlands. One spy, not at all *au fait* with clandestine tradecraft, was to be found proudly telling those he met, 'I am a government spy. If you don't tell us where Muhammad Aidrus is, we will bomb your house.'¹⁹

Unable to get their man, the British were frustrated. Arguments were constantly heard over 'whether to march into Yafa' or not'. During Sir Charles Johnston's time as Governor in the early 1960s, he refused to back a ground incursion into tribal territory. He was not alone. Brigadier James Lunt, the Commander of the FRA from 1961 to 1964 and a former officer in Glubb Pasha's Arab Legion, who had prepared with his senior officers a plan for a ground assault, also got cold feet. There was no realistic possibility that the Yafa' would give up Aidrus in this scenario and, besides, it risked upsetting the delicate tribal equilibrium the British had established upcountry. Trevaskis felt they had taken this stance 'not because he is a great anti-colonialist but because he is the principal Affifi, is regarded as a sort of witch doctor with rain-making properties and is in any event a very good chap'.²⁰

Hard-headed colonial reactionary though he may have been, Trevaskis accepted the constraints under which British colonialism operated. 'I have no faith in bombing short of total destruction of villages, which is of course out of the question.'²¹ British policy, for the time being, would extend no further than Lower Yafa', and even then it would have to be indirect.²²

Muhammad Aidrus' principal grievance was that the British had adjudicated in the appointment of his younger brother Mahmud following the death of their father, Mahmud bin Mohsin Affifi the elder (known as Old Aidrus), who had died following a short illness in January 1960. One of the last people to see him alive, Ken Trevaskis recalled how even though the old sultan was frail and quite obviously knocking on death's door, he could still 'work himself up into a passable rage'.²³

'The old sultan was batty,' recalled Stephen Day, 'and in Yemeni tribal tradition, to be mad is to be touched by God.' Even though his health suffered badly in the late 1950s, Old Aidrus still exerted a powerful grip on his people. 'He was regarded with something like awe and I recall on one occasion the tribes gathered to celebrate Eid. Cackling with laughter, he fired his pistol at them. That reinforced his authority even more!' Sultan Mahmud's state of mind, though erratic, was not uncommon among those sultans who married their cousins.²⁴ So long as he remained on the right side of the British, everything was kosher.

Over time, Old Aidrus came to be regarded by the British as 'a very powerful man'. Spending most of his life in al-Qara, a mystical Yafa' city built on an ancient bathsalt plinth, the Sultan rarely ventured beyond its walls. A hundred miles inland, al-Qara had borne the brunt of epic tribal battles fought in this part of Arabia across the centuries.

Old Aidrus's rule extended over some 1,000 square miles of his Lower Yafa' sultanate. A physically impressive territory, its arid landscape was broken up only by high mountains rising 8,000ft above sea level and deep ravines and wadis. The highest peak was Jebel Yazidi, situated to the north of al-Qara. Lower Yafa's population was estimated to be somewhere in the region of 100,000 and was composed of a confederation of tribes. Ahl Affifi, the tribe constituting the ruling royal house, occupied an enclave around al-Qara. The Affifi tribal section could be found concentrated in the towns of Ja'ar and al-Husn, as well as in parts of Abyan, particularly in Fanah and Rumeilah. Other tribal lines included the Ahl Sa'ad, Ahl Kalad, Ahl Yahar, Ahl Yazid, Ahl Nakhhibi and Ahl Masha'al. The Yafa' were known as the wolves of Hemyar due to superstition about their fighting prowess and their tribal diaspora could be found as far east as Jebel Akhdar (the 'Green Mountain') in Muscat and Oman.

The old Sultan's power did not depend on how many tribesmen he had under arms (although this was important) but on his established reputation as a mediator of tribal disputes. An early assessment written by Stephen Day's predecessor, Dick Holmes, explained how this worked:

The chief function is mediation and much of his influence derives from the fact that most major disputes are brought to him for settlement. His success as a peace-maker is partly the result of his long experience but chiefly arises from his quasi-religious standing as the Affifi sultan. It is widely believed throughout the sultanate that he has rain-giving powers. This has given rise to the superstition that if the tribes do not pay their Asshur to him their lands will not be watered and that if he does not pray for rain, no rain will come.²⁵

Old Aidrus's authority, though it rested on pre-Islamic tribal customs, became an integral component of the tribal system the British manipulated in the Protectorate.

At 2 a.m. on 29 January 1960, Ken Trevaskis had been woken by a telephone call from Robin Young to inform him that Sultan Mahmud had died at midnight. After a quick wash and shave, he dressed in time to receive a delegation of Yafais, including Ali Atif, the chief of the Kaladi section of Yafa', who sought advice about succession arrangements. 'We didn't get much sleep,' Trevaskis later noted in his diary.²⁶ After two days of protracted negotiations, Trevaskis met Johnston to brief him that tribal consensus seemed to be favouring the Affifi tribal line. Trevaskis then telegraphed Young to advise him on the succession process. 'You will appreciate,' he wrote, 'that H.M.G. approval is required for appointment of a new Sultan.'²⁷ This put paid to any fiction that Britain had no influence on the

decision by the Lower Yafa' State Council. After considerable speculation over who would succeed Old Aidrus, it was announced that his 11-year-old son Mahmud would be taking his place as the head of the Yafa'. A child king in the style of an Indian maharaja,²⁸ Mahmud's main job was to put a local face on British colonialism in his sultanate. Lower Yafa' now became central to British plans. It would serve as a buffer between the lawless tribal area to its north and the Crown colony of Aden in the south.

Two weeks later, young Mahmud Aidrus was crowned sultan, an occasion marked according to the usual tribal custom of the slaughter of 50 bulls. His elder brother Muhammad, disgruntled about the choice of Mahmud as successor, even agreed to observe a temporary peace as a mark of respect for their late father. Outward appearances were significant here and it was important to 'make a show of it,' Robin Young told Dick Holmes. Not only would Britain foot the bill for the lavish coronation but it would also dispatch Hunter aircraft and large numbers of troops to give the impression that the young sultan could pack a considerable punch, if it was required. Dick Holmes telegraphed Trevaskis with his initial thoughts on what would be required:

In addition to other signs of prosperity, such as slaughtering oxen and bringing gifts of coffee, Frankincense and elaborately stitched garments, it is strongly felt that the occasion will have been wasted if there is not a demonstration of power behind the Sultan. This could best be obtained by the guns and aeroplanes suggested in the programme, and I would be most grateful if H.Q.B.F. could be approached with this in view.²⁹

Bonfires, fireworks, singing and dancing all accompanied this grand occasion as the young sultan was installed on the throne of Lower Yafa'.

The spectacle of local rulers giving long speeches typically culminated in an RAF flypast and a parade by local federal troops, complete with marching band, schoolchildren, camel-trains, horsemen and tribesmen. It was a mirage, cleverly designed to depict the observation of local customs, behind which lay row upon row of British SMLE rifles and cash. Often these rifles were issued on a chit as part of Miscellaneous Political Expenses (or 'MPE' funds), typical of the way in which political officers operated in the Protectorate. British advisers were well aware that 'generous political grants are now being paid to member states of the Federation,' wrote Arthur Watts, an Assistant Adviser in the WAP. 'Should it be politically unavoidable to make payments to peoples of the Federated States, then adequate justification for such payments should be recorded in the Assistant Adviser's memorandum book.'³⁰ The need to forensically record and audit everything was typical of the way British imperialism operated, even in its twilight years.

One of young Mahmud's first tasks was to resolve disputes between his five muktab, who require little excuse to feud with one another. 'No interest or honour is derived from such feuds but on the contrary such feuds lead to loss of life and property and the prevalence of fear and fright and the breaking of communications and contact with each other,' Mahmud told them. He called on them to observe a truce from the first of Ramadan 1379 (28 February 1960). 'Every wise thinking ends with good results,' he trumpeted, in a sign of his advanced years.

Soon after his coronation, Mahmud was packed off to England with his younger brother Faisal to continue their public-school education. The task of resolving tribal disputes on a day-to-day basis would fall to his Naib (deputy) Haidara Mansur, who governed Lower Yafa' on behalf of the young sultan. He was closely advised by the British Agent and his team of political officers in the administrative centres of Ja'ar and Zingibar. With the Dolas (tribal government) behind him, Naib Mansur became the perfect instrument through which Britain could influence Protectorate affairs.³¹

In order to ensure that the truce held, a dhirwa (stipend) was paid to each headman. As with so many of Britain's colonial outposts, money spoke louder than words.³² Muhammad, meanwhile,

continued to receive weapons, money and training of his own from his backers in Yemen, even courting the Aden Trade Union Council (ATUC) and South Arabian League (SAL) for political support.³³ Muhammad's underground network was sophisticated. It stretched from Upper Yafa' right down into Aden and drew in key Yafais, including merchants, government workers and small businessmen in Little Aden, Crater and Ma'ala. From secret printing presses he bombarded the muktabs with constant propaganda:

Oh sons of Yafa'! All these deeds which I have performed for your interest, your honour, dignity and protection of your homeland have been considered crimes by the British imperial Government which claim democracy, justice and protection. They do not want any internal reforms because they understand that any internal reforms are against their colonial policy from every aspect. Internal reforms close the doors of interference and the principle of the British policy is 'divide and rule'.³⁴

In a bid to undermine his brother's position, Muhammad appealed to their tribal loyalty: 'Government has now made this deliberate and patent aggression with the object of humiliating me and the people, he fumed.³⁵

Another way of dealing with relentless Yafai dissidence was to put the troublemakers under constant surveillance, ban them from entering Aden Colony and, whenever necessary, authorise military operations against them. Hunter pilots were dispatched on frequent missions to impose Britain's will on villages in the Sa'adi area and the Ahl Muharam, which had never experienced rule from outsiders before. Robin Young explained the situation:

We have been asked by the Minister of Internal Security to get rid of Muhsin Hamud and been told by him that he did not agree to the use of infantry but thought that air action would solve the problem and that the political climate was now suitable.

Young sought authority from Trevaskis to implement his plan of pacifying those areas that had fallen under Muhammad's control. His target, Muhsin Hamud, would now suffer the same harassment as Muhammad Aidrus. It was all part of a grander plan to consolidate support for the Federation.

We have been assured by the local authorities that once Muhsin Hamud has gone, the Lower Yafa' authorities and the Federal Government will have a far better chance of bringing Yafa' al Haid and eventually Upper Yafa' under their influence.³⁶

Again, the British were keen to stress how such action should be presented – as having been taken 'on behalf of Arabs and on Arab initiative'.³⁷ By strengthening Mahmud's rule, British interests would in turn be safeguarded.

According to Sir Charles Johnston, Britain's primary responsibility in Yafa' – beyond keeping Lower Yafa' under indirect control – was to 'discharge our treaty obligations to the Upper Yafa' Chiefs'. Upper Yafa' was regarded as 'no-man's-land', in which neither Britain nor Yemen would interfere. Britain ensured peace and tranquillity reigned by making a down payment of 'quite insignificant stipends' to tribal leaders to dissuade them from revolt. This was in keeping with practices elsewhere in the empire. As the renowned journalist and coloniser Randolph Churchill once told Ken Trevaskis on a visit to Aden, what made Britain great 'was not brute strength but men who had had the ingenuity to get results on the cheap'.³⁸

This became even more important after Imam Ahmad, the ruler of North Yemen, was discovered to have dispatched agents to al-Baidha, along the Yemeni border, where they encouraged dissent in neighbouring Upper Yafa'. Johnston wrote to London in a blind panic, claiming:

In brief, the Yemeni border authorities continue to make as they can with the limited resources at present available to them.

The covert activities which they inspire and sustain must be countered if the situation is not further to deteriorate.

Consequently, Johnston sought permission from London to take immediate action against Yemeni-sponsored subversion. His recommendation, unsurprisingly, was to provide rifles and cash to the Upper Yafa' sultans, which, he argued, had the 'merit of being practicable and comparatively cheap'.³⁹

Johnston went cap in hand for the sum of £26,000 (roughly £400,000 in today's money), with which he hoped to placate the tribes over the next 12 months. This consisted of £17,000 in stipends paid to tribal chiefs from central Colonial Office funds, with a further 150 tribal retainers of £60 each, totalling some £9,000, doled out over the course of the year. Johnston shared Trevaskis's view that stipends and retainers were the 'most effective and economical way of making a start on the uphill task of restoring the position in Upper Yafa'.'⁴⁰

Nowhere was this form of indirect rule better explained than in the handbook issued to all political officers:

Her Majesty's Government neither is, nor intends to be, the administering authority in the area. Instead she provides advice on administration. She draws no revenue from the territory: on the contrary she affords financial assistance in the form of grants-in-aid for the security forces, education, medical services, agriculture, etc. and by paying the salaries of the advisory staff. She enforces no laws of her own.

And so, in Lower Yafa', as in other parts of South Arabia, as one senior military figure put it: 'the garrison turned inland to whack or woo the turbulent tribes – wooing them a little cynically with presents of arms. Less infrequently, the gentle rhythm of this Red Sea *concierge* was broken by the imperial call to arms'.⁴¹

Even by applying this strategy they were still losing their grip over tribal dynamics in the hinterland, particularly because of efforts by the Imam in Yemen and the Egyptians who were also sponsoring dissidents. But decolonisation was now in train and even a Tory government could do nothing to reverse the process.

A LETTER FROM KING HUSSEIN

IMAM AL-NASR AHMAD bin Yahya, Hamid al-Din, the Zaydi high priest-king of Yemen from 1948 to 1962, was a cruel man. A control freak with bulging eyes, he presided over a sinister regime in a medieval country and his main plan for Yemen in international affairs seemed to be splendid isolation. Respect for the human rights and freedoms of his people could not have been further from Imam Ahmad's mind. He was an absolute monarch and there were few matters he did not personally oversee. One of his favourite pastimes was public execution, and he relished the opportunity to personally supervise the beheading of those who stood accused of plotting against him.

A man of few inhibitions, who was said to have bravely faced down several attempted assassinations, Imam Ahmad rejoiced in the torture of those accused of treachery. Some of his enemies were reported to have been condemned to live out a life of servitude permanently lashed to a ball and chain. Yemen, in all its primitive splendour, earned a well-deserved reputation for instilling fear in both its supporters and opponents alike.

Britain's Conservative government opposed Imam Ahmad's regime in the 1950s, not for its harsh treatment of its citizens but because of the irredentist challenge Yemen posed to their interests in the Aden Protectorate. In Imam Ahmad's mind, Aden formed part of his wider kingdom. By signing the Jeddah Pact with Egypt and Saudi Arabia in 1956, the Imam aligned himself more closely to an anti-colonial outlook.⁴² And by 1958 he had led Yemen into the United Arab Republic alongside Egypt and Syria.⁴³ As a gesture to his new bedfellows, the Imam kept up his underhand sponsorship of dissident tribes hostile to British authorities in Aden.⁴⁴

Ensuring the security of Aden became Britain's number-one priority once Nasser declared all-out opposition to British imperialism in Arabia and sought to apply further pressure on the Imam to allow Egyptian troops to be stationed on Yemeni soil. The spread of Nasser's brand of militant Arab nationalism now preoccupied British Cabinet ministers, soldiers, mercenaries and spies, just as much as Soviet Communism. As Yemen grew in strategic importance, it became imperative for Britain to build up strong alliances with friendly countries across the Middle East to counter-balance Soviet and Egyptian malevolence.

One such important alliance was with His Majesty King Hussein bin Talal of Jordan, who attended the Commissioning Course at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst for six months in September 1952. Known simply as Officer Cadet Hussein to his fellow cadets and instructors, the young Jordanian took a keen interest in Britain's fortunes in the Middle East, if only because of his awareness of the emergence of Nasserism. Close though his ties to Britain had become, they did not stop him from dismissing his senior British adviser, General John Glubb (known as 'Glubb Pasha'), on 1 March 1956. London's influence in Jordan was by now on the wane, a process begun a year earlier when the British tried unsuccessfully to court Jordan into the Baghdad Pact.⁴⁵

Glubb Pasha's sacking was a serious blow to British prestige but it demonstrated the young king's desire to dispel the impression that Jordan had become a puppet of Western imperialism. From the perspective of the royal palace in Amman his thinking was clear – dismantling the last vestiges of British influence was a necessary first step in rebuffing internal left-wing opposition and external Egyptian aggression. Anglo-Jordanian relations continued to decline, only picking up again in May 1961 when King Hussein married Antoinette Gardiner, the daughter of a British Army officer.

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