

and two days later they marry. These things never really happen, do they? I don't like to see kissing in the streets. I was in Paris, and saw a boy and girl kissing at traffic lights. It's terrible. It's not the place and it doesn't have the mood. I try to be strict in making our students behave well. It's better to be ignorant and polite than educated with no manners.

'I hope the mistakes we make will be new ones of our own, because we are trying to experiment for ourselves. We are building a new generation to take our place and we know that the pen can lead them to a prison or a palace. It is for them to choose and if we don't make them right then one day they will destroy us. I am sure of that.'

The money rush nearly did. It hit Oman as the country was struggling to develop, and seemed like a miraculous remedy for every bottleneck and delay. Income rose from \$226 million in 1973 to \$1.02 billion the following year, most paid direct to the Sultan who distributed it to ministries according to his own preferences. Oil revenues are still paid direct to him, and the amount is a closely guarded secret. In 1978 he received about \$1.5 billion.

The bonanza was followed by massive overspending and uncontrolled extravagance as ministers realized that the way to increase their budget was to tempt the Sultan with a prestige project and promise it could be finished as a birthday present by National Day. A television system was introduced in 1974 at far greater cost than necessary, although the TV station in Muscat remains a source of great pride and is a ritual stop for state visitors (the German engineers disappear to the background during these occasions, and Omanis are seen to be in control). Pipeline worth \$50 million was ordered, and left to rust because there was no available project and no one could decide what to do with it. A desalination plant estimated at \$57 million was rushed through on the promise that it would be ready for National Day 1975 and would provide the Sultan's garden at Sib with a million gallons of water a day. Eventually the cost was \$300 million, it had to be closed down for technical reasons, and water and power in Oman cost about five times

as much as necessary. Electricity costs the average household about £50 a week during the hottest months of the summer. The *falaj* system of underground waterways, built painstakingly by the Persians nearly two thousand years ago and still in use elsewhere, has been neglected, and boreholes were sunk indiscriminately without thought for the future.

There were so many crooks in the planning office that the same land was sold several times to different buyers and some found they had no access except through other people's gardens. Contracts were signed willy-nilly and, as in other money-rush countries, there was something for everyone. A Japanese firm unsuccessful in competing for a television station in Salalah suggested they should organize the fishing concession instead. Experience was unimportant, and corruption was part of everyday life. 'The Sultan refers to it as "sweets for the children",' said one bank manager. 'On some road-building contracts there is a fifty per cent mark-up for commission. Naturally it is always denied and is done carefully enough to be unprovable in law, but protestations of innocence from Arabs leave me unmoved. As a banker you see these things. Everyone is involved, including British advisers.'

The Sultan is more circumspect. 'One can't be a hundred per cent sure there is no bribery. Maybe one in a hundred puts something in his pocket. I would not swear it did not happen, but not in a big way. And people know here that if they do wrong they will be punished. There is no doubt about it.'

The biggest extravagance was military. The communist-backed Dhofar rebellion did not end officially until 30 April 1976. The Shah promised a squadron of Phantoms, in addition to troops from the Imperial Iranian Task Force, but insisted on a proper airfield. A 4000-metre runway was constructed at Thumrait within nine months regardless of expense. Cement was flown from Alaska, and the total cost was \$145 million. The Iranian Air Force used it once during the following year.

In 1974 the Sultan ordered Jaguar aircraft and a Rapier guided-missile system, both considered beyond Oman's needs by military experts and even the British who sold them. 'The early warning system might hold up the Shah, or whoever, for

five minutes,' says a senior British diplomat. 'However, everyone's got this sort of stuff and I'd much rather they had our version than the French one.'

The Sultan, like a fifteen-year-old boy about to drive a Formula One racing car, does not agree the equipment is too sophisticated. 'If you look at things militarily, what you use today will be obsolete in two or three years' time,' he says. 'It's better to buy something really up to date so you can use it for the next ten years. If you get anything less you will soon be far behind.' Nevertheless, in a tacit admission that he was too extravagant he restricted government spending in July 1974 – only to commit a further £200 million to his air defences two months later. He is proud of his military knowledge and takes his authority seriously. When he announced that he was dividing his forces into three separate branches, a colleague joked, 'I suppose you will have uniforms made as Admiral of the Fleet, Marshal of the Royal Air Force, and Commander-in-Chief?'

'I already have,' replied the Sultan gravely.

The RAF left Masira, a base they had established as an emergency landing ground in 1932, on 31 March 1977. The Sultan gave them a five o'clock celebration tea party, and denied he was letting the Americans take over to monitor Russian movements in the Indian Ocean. He began to establish links with the Chinese, though, and is determined to appear independent and strong, hence an armoury which takes at least forty per cent of the country's budget and phoney statistics which boost the population from a reliable estimate of 500000 to nearer 750000 in official pronouncements.

The stockpiling of weapons is paralleled by nervousness about his personal safety, for which he takes precautions of a less tangible nature. Superstition forbids him to travel on certain days of the week – it used to be Fridays, now it is Wednesdays – and a woman from the interior with psychic powers was paid an under-secretary's salary, given a Mercedes, and interpreted his dreams. His mysticism is at a more primitive level than the Shah's and therefore easier to manipulate. One senior minister, closely associated with a British contracting company, wears armbands with 'magical' symbols designed to