

Ghost of the Raj

'The sinner who goes to Muscat has a foretaste of what is coming to him in the other world.'

Persian proverb

'One reads about groups around the world assassinating people, kidnapping, hijacking. We have to be careful if we want peace and security so our people can enjoy freedom and wealth.'

SULTAN QABOOS OF OMAN

It was Thursday midday in Muscat, capital city of Oman, and the weekend exodus had begun. Outside the new police station, Superintendent John Eggleton, lately of the Northumberland constabulary, rocked back and forth on his heels in the sunshine and watched traffic building up on the only road north to fishing villages on the picturesque Batinah coast.

'It's a wonderful way of life here,' he said. 'Unspoilt country, beautiful scenery. . . .'

Had he looked at it another way, he could have seen beauty already marred by unplanned ribbon development reminiscent of Santa Monica, although roadside billboards have an inspirational rather than commercial message: FORWARD OMAN UNDER THE GLORIOUS LEADERSHIP OF HM SULTAN QABOOS. GOD IS BEHIND YOU.

But after twenty-seven years in the British police Superintendent Eggleton did not regret coming to this, the last corner of Arabia. Until a few years ago it was the most backward country in the world, ruled by a preposterous despot whom the British finally exiled to Claridge's Hotel. It is now being dragged

into the twentieth century. A strategic coastline covering 1800 kilometres of the Indian Ocean and entrance to the Gulf, and proximity of Russian footholds in the Middle East and Africa, give it a vulnerability which ensures finance and flattery not only from the Saudis but also from Western governments and neighbouring Arab countries whose leaders tend to refer disparagingly to the Sultan and his father as 'those Indians'. The money rush makes all participants mutually dependent, however much they despise their differences.

Oman is run largely by foreigners,¹ particularly British deposited in post-colonial tristesse from Aden or India to create a society where permissiveness will not strike and where respect for old values and authority remains a virtue. 'The Omanis are such wonderful people,' confides a grande dame at a chic cocktail party. (Oman, compared to Saudi Arabia, is a paradise for the self-indulgent.) 'They are submissive without being presumptuous.'

It wrecks a spirit of enthusiastic self-awakening to dwell too much on submissiveness, so nations do not boast about their role in Oman's development. America sends millions of dollars via Saudi Arabia,² a book-keeping exercise abstruse enough to confuse the most diligent economic sleuth, and the ubiquitous CIA have met Qaboos to plan closer links between the two countries at the expense of the British, whose altruism towards Oman has a two-hundred-year history. It is not officially disclosed how many men were provided by the élite Special Air Service (SAS) for the British Army Training Team (BATT). Soldiers themselves were forbidden to tell even relatives when they were sent there. In fact, the Sultan employs about six hundred, two-thirds of whom are on individual contracts. The rest are seconded from the British army. There is also a secret security force said to be commanded by two members of the SAS and directly responsible to the Sultan.

Now that they have given the communist chappies in Dhofar the old heave-ho (well, almost), British Army folk can cultivate those other military occupations, empire building and bitchery. 'There is continuous rivalry between us and the men on loan,' says a senior officer who, having retired after thirty years' distinguished service in the British Army, finds himself earning

£16000 a year tax free 'trying to weed out the Sultan's forces' miles away from the pleasant home counties cottage to which he returns for a few weeks each year.

'My life,' he continues, 'is hell. I am a bloody mercenary. Would I be here if it wasn't the money? All I am trying to do is carry out the Sultan's orders to produce a jolly good navy, a first-class air force and a super army, but the continual harassment and aggravation from officers of the British Army would be considered mutiny anywhere else.

'Lots of English are on the take, and it makes me very ashamed. The rip-off is twenty-five per cent. It used to be seven per cent. Only a few months ago we had to get rid of someone who had taken £1 million in backhanders from contractors who built runways during the civil war. He was given cash payments, so nothing could be proved. Now he is living in America.

'One part of my job is to see that the Sultan buys the correct weapons. The trouble is that if he sees a nice-looking tank he thinks he needs it, and the British Ministry of Defence encourage him. They want to keep control over the country, even if it does mean we have far too many sophisticated weapons. Anyway they could stop a serious aggressor only for about three minutes if there was anyone competent enough to use them, which there is not. No doubt it is good for British arms manufacturers, but if the Sultan had not been so indoctrinated he would have got rid of the British years ago.'

The officer, who claimed that his life had been threatened in two anonymous telephone calls, mentioned several times during the conversations which took place over four days, that 'I shall deny I ever spoke to you, of course.' Such cloak-and-dagger melodramatics are an integral part of life amongst those who have lived several years in Oman. Whispered confidences and hushed condemnations which they dare not speak aloud came from the most unlikely sources - bank managers, auditors, company chairmen, diplomats, as well as senior army officers. Some of the allegations are true, but others derive from a sense of frustrated self-importance characteristic of old colonials. They are flotsam of the empire who have lived their adult lives abroad and could never return to the Britain that first inspired

their loyalty because, in their eyes, it no longer exists. So they come to rest finally in Oman where benevolent paternalism is appreciated, and they find to their despair that the money rush creates new attitudes amongst the natives and attracts a different class of Britisher into administration. It isn't cricket, and it isn't fair, and it certainly isn't democratic.

'Democracy?' says Superintendent Eggleton, and the word drifted dream-like through the torpid atmosphere as if its very enunciation is its own condemnation. 'Democracy? Well, there are all sorts, aren't there? The one in England is undesirable and is ceasing to be one. Here, they have an excellent type of democracy and can probably get away with it. I hope they do.'

Had he looked at it another way, he could have said that Oman has no parliament, no elections, no free speech, press censorship which makes Iran seem liberal, and travel restrictions which make Saudi Arabian visa requirements no more arduous than embarking on a day trip to Clacton-on-Sea.³

But he said simply, 'It takes a few months to adjust.'

He earns £900 a month tax-free on a three-year contract, is provided with a cook and houseboy, and uses a welfare shop where he can buy goods on credit at reduced prices. The police also have their own stadium – the only one in Oman with real grass, flown in deep-frozen from South America. It is part of the Sultan's policy, learnt from the British and perfected with advice from his hero the Shah, to create rival power blocks in order to diminish the threat of a strong single-minded opposition. The armed forces are now split into a navy, army, and air force, each with its own commander. He has competitive secret services, and has allowed the police to become a much envied para-military force with their own separate air wing. The Ceylonese-born commander, Felix da Silva, is British and so are the head of immigration and the intelligence chief. Communication between the various groups of armed authority is restrained and leads to the sort of bureaucratic muddle so common to civilized societies: an international arms dealer in Europe was surprised by an order from the Oman police for 400 Lee Enfield rifles. Two days earlier he had bought some weapons from the army – 400 Lee Enfield rifles.

Felix da Silva has ingratiated himself with the Sultan to such

an extent that the police are all-powerful. Until recently the British and American embassies were not informed if one of their citizens was in trouble, and people were deported within twenty-four hours without any form of trial. The Shell subsidiary, Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), paid the fine of a girl secretary badly hurt in a car crash. 'She was convicted of drunk driving. But she wasn't drunk, and she wasn't driving,' said a colleague. 'The other car was driven by a policeman, though.'

Magistrates are appointed by the police. 'Who else is going to do it?' asked Mr Eggleton, and he added reassuringly: 'We choose good, erstwhile people with a public conscience. In a developing country, you cannot have the whole complicated business we have in the West. We are trying to be simple about it, and I would say it works better than the English system. I was always frustrated there by hold-ups, shilly-shallying back and forth. Here people get a very quick, fair hearing. The Omanis have very strong ideas about fairness. . . .'

Just then all the traffic at the intersection of the road from Muscat to the airport was halted, and road blocks set up.

'Don't worry,' said Superintendent Eggleton. 'It won't be more than half an hour. The Sultan is going to see President Numeiry off. Anything else you want to ask?'

'Wasn't one man hauled into prison because he accidentally cut an electricity cable with a plough?'

'It's important to take a serious view of that sort of thing. Electricity is vital here. Besides, as I said, the magistrates are very fair.'

All traffic on the main road was now being hustled into the nearest turning.

Under Sharia law, which operates in all the money-rush countries except Iran, women are barred from court and have to testify through an open window. A man's word equals that of two women. Superintendent Eggleton explained that women did not actually commit crimes in Oman, so it was academic liberalism to suggest the tradition was archaic, and he continued with his thoughts about justice. 'The British go on the facts of the case and are blind to everything else,' he said. 'The biggest villain unhung can get off. You are not allowed hearsay evidence

which I often thought was very unfair because it does not give the judge the right idea. Here it's much more normal. If someone has done wrong, he is the first to admit it, and that makes it much easier for the police. I had to fight in England to keep a relationship between the police and the public.'

Half an hour passed. Superintendent Eggleton remained unperturbed. 'Won't be long now. We've just heard they have left the palace.'

Earlier in the year, his sixteen-year-old son had been out to Oman, and loved it . . . He was going to join the British Navy.

An hour passed.

A few weeks previously, the Sultan hired a circus from England for about £200,000, to perform on National Day, 18 November, which is also his birthday. The police were in charge of the organization and unfortunately charged so much – from £5 to £12 – that very few Omanis could afford to attend. The tickets were reduced to between £1 and £7, and then replaced by free shows.

'It was a great success,' recalls Superintendent Eggleton. There is always something prestigious on National Day – the opening of a new television station, dropping sweets on children from an air force aeroplane, firework displays (organized by a British company) and military bands whose tunes symbolically merge Oman's past with its present: 'The Skye Boat Song,' and 'I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy'.

Two hours passed.

There was surprisingly little obvious complaint from Omani drivers who had been waiting in the 100 degree heat. Some were out of their cars, and sat on the roadside. Many Europeans and Americans who only wanted to cross the main road, a matter of a few yards, swore and cursed as they saw their weekend arrangements wrecked. 'We'll never be able to get away now.'

'Not long to wait,' said Superintendent Eggleton happily.

Occasionally a police car came into sight, lights full on and siren flashing, leaving dust in its wake and a silence which seemed eerie and improbable with so many people delayed for so long for no apparent reason. It was as if they had been sedated, and perhaps they had by the heat. Such passivity would be inconceivable in most countries.