

The Shaikh, the Lady and the Colonel

'If you support the Arabs you get it in the neck.'

MRS MARGARET MCKAY

former British Labour Member of Parliament

'There can be few deeper satisfactions than to have played a part in helping a country or a people forward to a life of peace, under an honest government.'

COLONEL SIR HUGH BOUSTEAD

former political agent in the Gulf, The Wind of Morning, p. 237

Most of Shaikh Zayed's family are too restless to take part in rustic folk-dancing now they are leaders of a country which has grown to such international importance in so short a time. He himself still has the bedou mentality, wandering from place to place, but instead of a camel he uses a VC10; instead of a casual *majlis* he is surrounded by Palestinian advisers, as befits a world statesman; and instead of simple delights like hunting with an old musket, he takes a machine gun to the pheasants, according to neighbours at his former British home, Buxted Park.

His eighteen-year-old son, Mohammed, had inherited a romantic nature, it seemed, when he bought £300 of equipment and set out to camp on Dartmoor. But it began to rain and he returned hastily to the comforts of a £1500 a week hotel, temporary lodgings whilst he neglected to attend the language course for which he had been sent to England.

Shaikha Fatima has formed a much publicized women's movement, but has never been seen by a man other than her

husband since puberty. 'For me to be without the *burqa* would be the same as a Western woman to walk the streets naked,' she says. When she made an official visit to Egypt, sidewalks were cleared along her route so that no man would see her.

'You can imagine how difficult it was,' says her secretary and companion, Abla Nuweis, a beautiful twenty-nine-year-old Egyptian who has lived in the UAE for nine years. 'But Shaikha Fatima promised Shaikh Zayed that she would never let a man see her. It is not jealousy. These people do not want to alter their ways. But change is coming. Seven years ago, she did not leave her house at all. Now she goes all over the place.'

For all she sees and hears she might well remain at home. 'When we go to London,' continues Abla Nuweis, 'we take about thirty other women. The plane is met by a Rolls-Royce, and we go straight to Shaikha Fatima's house in The Boltons. We never see a man. The chauffeur is a woman. Shaikha Fatima does not go shopping. Harrods send clothes for her to try. If you asked me to live like that, I could not. But it is her custom and she is happy. It's a strange life.'

The rush to respond to feminist pressure has its peculiarities. Aisha Ali Sayyar, director of social services in Abu Dhabi, keeps her veil in the bottom drawer of her desk as a precaution. She feels that some men expect her to wear it, she told me.

But what about the trickle of UAE students who have been educated abroad and are beginning to return home with strange ideas? Shaikh Zayed's respected foreign minister, Ahmed Khalifa al-Suweidi, was nonplussed when confronted by a group who had been invited to ask him questions. Instead of the anodyne remarks he anticipated, they said, 'Why can't we vote?' and 'Why should the ruler dispose of oil money in any way he likes?' Visibly shaken, he muttered to a British friend, 'I suppose that is what you call democracy. It is not something we are used to.'

Zayed thinks the British are partly to blame. 'The tragedy remains that they did not prepare the area or its people for independence of any sort. We were suddenly left on our own. It was a hasty decision. What worried me most was the failure of Britain to fulfil its responsibilities.'

Adnan Pachachi adds, 'It was not deliberately malicious. No