

# Spies in Arabia

*The Great War and the Cultural  
Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire  
in the Middle East*

PRIYA SATIA

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# Introduction

I wonder why Arabia is the best-looking land, however you see it.  
I suppose it is the name that does it.

—T. E. Lawrence, 1916

These gentlemen have formed a plan of *geographical morality*, by which the duties of men . . . are not to be governed by their relation to the great Governor of the Universe, or by their relation to mankind, but by climates, degrees of longitude, parallels, not of life, but of latitudes: as if, when you have crossed the equinoctial, all the virtues die . . .; as if there were a kind of baptism, like that practised by seamen, by which they unbaptize themselves of all that they learned in Europe, and after which a new order and system of things commenced.

—Edmund Burke, 1788

At the start of the twentieth century, British intelligence agents first began seriously to venture into the region they knew as “Arabia.” They were drawn there by two objectives: the desire to secure the land route to India and the hope of finding in a proverbially mystical and antique land the metaphysical certainty they no longer felt at home. These competing objects created a dilemma for them as agents: How were they to gather practical information and serve the British state in a region they were attracted to because of its legendary inscrutability and promise of escape from Britain? The agents’ grappling with this

conundrum in the era of the Great War and the manifold consequences of the tactical and methodological choices they made form the subject of this book. This is a story about a state that could not see, that depended on equivocal agents groping blindly through a fog of cultural representations about the new region it sought to control and the unique epistemological and technological remedies they evolved to soothe their consciences and cure their blindness. Their work cast a long shadow over imperial statecraft and metropolitan culture in the twentieth century.

How states see—or don't see—is, in my view, a matter intricately bound up with cultural history; it may even be that all states are unseeing, or at least intensely myopic, without the benefit of a cultural lens to bring into focus the otherwise elusive space and people they rule. In most instances, this is the lens that concentrates the illuminations of the Enlightenment into a shaft powerful enough to strip a place of all idiosyncrasy and opacity, rendering it universally intelligible, empirically graspable. There are other places, however, in which the modern state's knowledge-gathering practices are refracted through different cultural lenses, places deemed beyond the domain of the universally accessible, rational, secular world—perhaps, in Edmund Burke's terms above, those places beyond the equinoctial. Burke was writing about India in the era of the notorious trial of Governor-General Warren Hastings, but questioning the ways of the empire and the limits of universalism was again the fashion on the eve of the Great War, when the gaze of the British state had fallen intently upon the region known as the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> The story of British intelligence-gathering in the Middle East reveals the extent to which cultural representations mattered in the epistemological strategies the British state employed there and the extent to which the varying standards of the empire's "geographical morality" flowed from epistemological principles. This is a story of a state so conscious of the particular illegibility of the terrain it sought to control that it forsook empiricism for intuition, with critical consequences for both Britain and the Middle East as the war and its violent aftermath unfolded in the region.

I am interested in this book in piecing together the world of British intelligence in the Middle East. More importantly, however, I want to unpack the enduring fascination with Arabia as a spy-space which colored this British effort (and has perhaps even attracted readers to this book).<sup>2</sup> My focus is on the formation and fallout of the cultural imagination that shaped agents' approach and methods, rather than on the efficacy of the information order as such—on thinking about intelligence and agents' skills rather than on the agents' actual abilities (a subject better left to intelligence experts).<sup>3</sup> Nor is my purpose to hold British representations of Arab views up against the Arab reality but to

demonstrate that the activities of the modern state are shaped by the cultural imagination.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, given received wisdom about the power of European cultural representations of the Orient, the cultural formation of intelligence agents must lie at the heart of any effort to understand British intelligence-gathering in the Middle East. The cultural imagination mattered especially in a region conceived in its very essence as a space for the imagination. As it happens, the intelligence agents wandering in the Middle East were among those early-twentieth-century Britons questioning the reliability of sense perception at a time when what Weber famously called the “disenchantment of the world” had triggered an almost desperate interest in matters spiritual. These were not the obscure, anonymous intelligence workers of a later, more bureaucratic era, but social, political, and, in some cases, cultural elites emerging from a range of professional backgrounds, from military to diplomatic to scholarly. As a community, they shared almost without exclusion an intense literary ambition—many were prolific—and social contact with the British cultural and political establishments. Their personal searches for spiritual and cultural redemption, coupled with their practical difficulties in navigating desert topography, profoundly shaped their methods as agents, and their mixing with the worlds of letters and politics at home ensured that awareness of their work in the Middle East was diffuse. In a sense I am trying to bring the history of perceptions of the Orient together with the history of perception as such, for, the social world of Edwardian Britain ensured that imperial statecraft and metropolitan culture were mutually influential.

These agents’ most important methodological innovation was an intuitive intelligence epistemology modeled on their understanding of the “Arab mind.” Long immersion in the desert would, they thought, allow them to replicate the apparently intuitive knowledge-gathering and navigational practices of nomadic Arabs.<sup>5</sup> The premium this *modus operandi* placed on “genius” guaranteed them an enormous influence over the planning and execution of the Middle East campaigns of the Great War and over the postwar administration of the British-controlled Middle East. In the influence of their tactical imagination and epistemological outlook, this book argues, lies the explanation for the gradual transformation of British intelligence-gathering in the region from the informal, even accidental, work of world-weary Edwardians to the paranoid preoccupation of a brutal aerial surveillance regime after the war. If, as James Scott has recently urged, local knowledge can serve as an antidote to the imperialism of the modern state’s flattening gaze, in this instance agents of the British state fetishized local knowledge as the foundation of a violent effort to render nomad terrain legible. Their story is a reminder that imperialism is a

political relationship more than a perspective; intimacy does not make it go away.<sup>6</sup>

British intelligence in the Middle East was, in short, *different* from British intelligence projects in other parts of the world in this period. Certainly, British agents were also venturing into Germany, Japan, Persia, North America, India, and elsewhere. No other region, however, possessed such a combination of geopolitical cachet, cultural resonance, and utter unfamiliarity potent enough to indelibly mark intelligence practices and profoundly influence British popular and official culture. The intuitive mode was also a radical departure from the dogged empiricism of earlier and contemporary efforts to gather information in other regions perceived as essentially deceptive and disorienting, such as India, Australia, the Poles, and central Africa. Furthermore, the peculiarities of British relations with the Ottoman Empire and of the political organization of that empire meant that the intelligence project was itself interested in unique objects, as we shall see. Perhaps the most important evidence of the peculiarity of this intelligence project is Britons' frequent remarking of the fact, a theme that runs throughout what follows.<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, the British were not the only Great Power spying on the Middle East in this period; their concern about improving their intelligence sources was partly intensified by news of the exploits of Continental spies. An unsigned secret memorandum of 1909 among the papers of Vernon Kell, founder of the British Security Service (later MI5), urged the British state to emulate the German, French, Russian, and other foreign intelligence organizations in the lengths of deceit to which they were willing to go.<sup>8</sup> That said, in the end, no other European country sent as many agents or made as large a cultural investment in agents who went to Arabia. Nor did any other power eventually obtain a stranglehold over the region that allowed the logic of its intelligence system to play out in such dramatic ways. I am not making a claim for British cultural exceptionalism but for exceptional opportunity. Indeed, Germans shared many of the same cultural fascinations with the Middle East, but German withdrawal from the region after the war makes it a less useful case for exploring the relationship between those fascinations and statecraft. Russia's ultimate domination of Persia and Central Asia make a Russian version of the story more promising, not least for the light it might shed on what, if anything, is exceptional about the cultural fascinations with "Arabia" as opposed to the Middle East more broadly construed. The French story might also be usefully told, given the intensely brutal nature of postwar French rule in Syria, but the cultural significance of French agents in the Middle East is less clear. They never made the kinds of claims Britons, Germans, and Russians did to a special sympathy with the inhabitants of the region, and in British eyes at least, they were

remarkably “clumsy.” Historians, too, have called them “poor competitors”; in Edward Said’s succinct phrase: “There were no French Lawrences or Sykeses or Bells.”<sup>9</sup> In short, the British story is the big story about European intelligence-gathering and colonial control in the Middle East in the twentieth century, but its usefulness in helping us understand empire is general.

Thus, I am offering here a cultural history of the interwar British imperial state, of imperial information systems, the tactics of conquest, and the mechanisms of colonial rule, of how the colonial state sees, and the drastic steps it takes when it thinks it cannot see. Ultimately, as we shall see, the state that could not see became a state that could not be seen. The aerial surveillance regime in the Middle East was the ethereal outcropping of a style of imperial rule I call “covert empire.” The constitutional monarchies established in the British Middle Eastern mandates after the war are usually classed as instances of “indirect rule,” a style originally evolved in the Indian princely states.<sup>10</sup> This book argues, however, that the British did not so much rule through these potentates as sideline them for all matters pertaining to “imperial security”—a highly elastic rubric—by creating a parallel state, entirely informal and in the hands of intelligence officers who held real executive power. This was a new form of imperial rule, invisible, barely existing on paper, designed for an increasingly anti-imperialist postwar world, both at home and abroad. This was more than a case of the (unsuccessful) application of old imperial ideas—orientalist stereotypes, Indian experience, and so forth—in a new imperial space;<sup>11</sup> certainly there are continuities with the past, but there is also a historical specificity to British ideas about the Middle East and the style of imperial rule they underpinned. Racist constructions of Arabs go only so far in explaining the origins of the covert state and its technological infrastructure of air control, both considerable departures in British imperial practice. The explanation lies, I think, in British ideas about the kind of place Arabia was, historically contingent ideas informed by the cultural concerns of early-twentieth-century Britain and generating a commitment to a particular epistemological framework for knowing and governing the Middle East.

The Great War is the pivot of this story and must lie at the heart of any effort to understand the way affective knowledge informed state practice in the Middle East. It was the moment when the agents and their methods were bestowed with an official legitimacy and began to extend their reach into the realms of military operations and colonial administration. In recounting the story of the agents’ growing influence within official circles, and, increasingly, with the public at home, this book inevitably expands our understanding of the military, political, and cultural legacy of the war—which has for the most part been understandably but nevertheless narrowly focused on the Western

front—and of Britain’s imperial project in the Middle East, of which we know very little beyond the apparently idiosyncratic popularity of Lawrence of Arabia.<sup>12</sup> If intelligence agents were shaped by the cultural anxieties of British modernity, British modernity was itself touched by the shadow of the surveillance tactics applied in the Middle East. The state’s blindness was part of a wider contagion—as even the term, the “state,” refers not to a discrete entity, but to “a whole network of people and institutions,” a shifting organism whose assorted appendages are dispersed into the substrate of society.<sup>13</sup> I argue in this book that the cultural fascinations of the Middle East and of the agents who made their mark in it ensured that at a time when Britain hungered for heroes, imperial confidence, and the remains of a lost civilization, their traces could be found as much in contemporary literary modernism as in the romantic military tactics of the Middle Eastern theaters and the wartime turn to “development” as a means of reestablishing the constructive benevolence of the British Empire. Imperial expansion in and development of the Middle East helped blunt the sense of total rupture with the prewar past.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, in an increasingly mass democracy, how the state saw was a matter of public contention; the state’s growing invisibility in the Middle East was partly intended to evade this political flashpoint. Covert empire came into its own in the Middle East *because* a self-assertive mass democracy was coming into its own in Britain; in this sense, too, did it differ from the older paradigm of indirect rule. In a postwar political moment shaped by the campaign to assert democratic control over the state—to make the institutions of the state a mere administrative machinery manned by an actually governing citizenry—some segments of the British public were desperate to see what their state was up to in the land of imperial redemption. As they squinted at the desert horizon for evidence of their government’s good faith, a coarse critique of state secrecy gathering in their parched throats, they ensured not only that the state would twist into ever new shapes to avert and avoid their gaze, but that wider cultural perceptions of the Middle East would continue to shape its activity in the region. The point for my purposes is not whether ordinary Britons knew about or cared anything for their Middle Eastern empire but that there was a conversation about how much they knew, could know, should know—and why.

Thus, despite conventional wisdom about the relative absence of a culture of paranoid politics in Britain,<sup>15</sup> it was in fact doubly present: in the conspiracy thinking about “Eastern unrest” that underpinned the government’s obsessive surveillance of the Middle East and in the public’s growing suspicion of its government’s covert imperial activity once the promise of an affordable developmental empire was proven false. In Britain, as on the Continent, political paranoia played a fundamental role in the unfolding of interwar violence—albeit

displaced, in this case, onto colonial theaters—as the state strained under the triple burden of an increasingly recalcitrant empire, straightened means, and a critical public at home. Neither the exclusive intellectual property of the Right or the Left, political paranoia was the product of a certain epistemological outlook in which the intelligence agents at the heart of this book figured centrally, as servants of that state and symbolic proof of its ability to wage war and covertly conquer vast terrain by means of a single, intrepid genius.<sup>16</sup> This book thus seeks to illuminate some of the interwar ramifications of the British state’s much-remarked “culture of secrecy” and the public’s critique of it, particularly their joint influence on the shape of interwar empire, whose unique material and ideological forms have not been much recognized. Certainly, the critique evolved partly from an older tradition of populist working-class suspicions of a corrupt and conspiratorial state, a kindness returned by the state’s habitual interpretation of domestic subversion as the work of foreign agencies, whether in the assumption of a French hand behind working-class discontent during the Napoleonic Wars, the fears of German espionage that produced the security state of 1909–11, or the paranoia about Soviet manipulation of labor and the British Communist Party between the world wars.<sup>17</sup> The cultural history of British intelligence-gathering in the Middle East reveals the centrality of the Arabian imaginary, and the particular epistemology it produced, to the interwar state’s conspiracy thinking, even its focus on Bolshevism. What distinguished this moment of the state’s and the public’s mutual suspicions was its commentary on the democratic conditions of the postwar period. The apparent elusiveness and mystery of the region at issue permitted expression of the public’s and the government’s shared skepticism about the authenticity and viability of mass democracy from the moment of its inception. Britons insisting on democratic control, particularly over foreign policy, remained unconvinced that their assertions would translate into real power; they were less anti-imperialist than concerned about what the covert, because brutal, pursuit of empire did to democracy at home. By the same token, government officials, despite lip service to the principle, remained doubtful that an empire could be managed democratically without succumbing to manipulation by anti-imperial forces—the self-fulfilling anxiety that produced covert empire. This episode of political paranoia thus produced a powerful impact in both imperial state practices *and* domestic political culture. The covert and brutal form of interwar empire was a product of the British state’s imbrication with wider British culture in its enthrallment to certain cultural conceptions about Arabia but also in its theoretical accountability to a democracy. This was not only a state that couldn’t see but a *democratic* one in the throes of coming to terms with itself.<sup>18</sup>

In short, this book describes how particular intelligence and military practices and, ultimately, a particular kind of imperial state emerged from a particular cultural construction of the Middle East.<sup>19</sup> In doing so, it argues that violence and culture were more closely and literally allied in imperial rule than has generally been recognized. That Europeans derived power from cultural knowledge about the “Orient” is a commonplace; this book examines how representations shaped the practical knowledge-gathering projects of intelligence and surveillance in the Middle East. Recent literature has told us a great deal about the cultural violence done by the construction of colonial knowledge, in censuses, ethnographies, museums, and so forth. However, cultural representations also perform a more literal, physical kind of violence; Said argued from the outset that “representations have purposes, . . . they accomplish . . . many tasks.” This is a book about how representations mattered in the creation of material structures of power in the Middle East, how they *functioned*, how they underwrote the horrific episode of state-sanctioned violence that was the air control regime.<sup>20</sup>

By attending to cultural conceptions, this story sheds light on the continuities between the violence of imperialism and total war, as urged in the recent work of Mark Mazower, Isabel Hull, Hew Strachan, and others.<sup>21</sup> Hannah Arendt long ago implicated the British secret agent in the origins of European totalitarianism, although ultimately acquitting the British Empire itself of the “real” horrors of the twentieth century:

When the British Intelligence Services (especially after the First World War) began to attract England’s best sons, who preferred serving mysterious forces all over the world to serving the common good of their country, the stage seemed to be set for all possible horrors. . . . The happy fact is that . . . cruelty played a lesser role [in the British Empire] between the two World Wars than ever before and a minimum of human rights was always safeguarded.<sup>22</sup>

It is time, I think, to reexamine received wisdom about the relatively benign nature of the British state and to begin to understand how British officials reconciled genuine ethical scruples with the actual violence of imperial policing in the Middle East. Indeed, there remains a tendency to belabor Britain’s *relative* sanity, compared to the excesses of the Nazis, Soviets, and other goons of the twentieth century,<sup>23</sup> but this is an argument from false premises: it depends on uncritical acceptance of the empire’s self-representation as the Solomonic creator of a rule of law to whose authority it humbly, gracefully, and yet patronizingly submitted even itself. But this “rule of law” was in many ways a Trojan horse of codified and normalized exceptions that underwrote the coercions,

corruptions, expropriations, and various forms of abasement that made the empire possible. “Perversion of the law” (in Richard Price’s phrase), including the rules of war and any notion of the rights of “civilians,” was part of the empire’s daily functioning; atrocity was endemic to the “policing,” “pacification,” “punitive expeditions,” “counterinsurgency,” and “small wars” (small in the manner that the Himalayas were “hills”) that were routine aspects of imperial government, security, and expansion.<sup>24</sup> Air control, too, was a system of everyday violence. The crime was empire, air control merely its most technologically advanced instrument. This book strives to understand how Britons squared the belief that a unique ethical scrupulousness anchored their liberal empire and its compassionate counterinsurgency with the violent reality on the ground. These are weighty historical myths that continue to guide the unfolding of international military intervention. Some time after World War One, Britain forgot it was a “warfare state,” David Edgerton has shown; even while pioneering offensive air warfare, it packaged its bomber as a force for peace. It is not, I think, incidental to this forgetting that British airpower first stretched its wings in the mythical terrain of Arabia; it is there that we must search for the door to oblivion.<sup>25</sup>

Given my cultural preoccupations, readers looking for a guide to British *policy* in the Middle East might instead look to the extremely rich and sophisticated historiography on that subject, cited throughout this work. While this book does seek to increase our understanding of some policies, such as air control and the decision to hold on to the Middle Eastern mandates, it is essentially about the realm of state *practice*—military, diplomatic, intelligence. It does not dispute the historiography on policy so much as provide a cultural-historical explanation of the particular institutional environment in which it was formed and in which the knowledge it was based on was assembled. It argues that intelligence is a product of far more than a few professionals’ search for objective, if hidden, facts about another country. Its collation and interpretation occur in a far broader context than we have generally imagined, something our present discontents seem only to confirm. Information, its analysis, and its military and political fallout are culturally embedded phenomena.

A qualifying word about one of the key protagonists of this story is perhaps also in order. Scores of authors have minutely dissected T. E. Lawrence, although perhaps no one more than himself. I am less interested in the truth of his claims and his military insights than in the way contemporary Britons understood and valued them. Unique as he was in many ways, he was also a man of his time, and our understanding of him can only benefit from contextualization. I have tried here to embed the Lawrence phenomenon—both his self-fashioning and his popular reception—in the context of the cultural and

political exigencies of early-twentieth-century Britain by restoring him to an ensemble cast in what is at one level a prosopography. As Lawrence himself put it, others “could tell a like tale”: “My proper share was a minor one, but because of a fluent pen . . . I took upon myself . . . a mock primacy.”<sup>26</sup>

As for my own epistemological practice—apart from the perhaps ironic intuition of a connection between prewar musings on Arabia’s inscrutability and the postwar aerial surveillance regime—I have tried to tell this story about intelligence-gathering by drawing on an assemblage of intelligence records, correspondence, memoranda of the Foreign, India, Colonial, and War offices, the Air Ministry, and other official records, assuming that their language emerges out of a particular cultural formation, for, such documents are, in the last analysis, written by individuals shaped by a particular set of ideas and cultural concepts, a *mentalité*. My temporal focus has been fortunate in terms of source recovery in that intelligence was far from professionalized during much of the period. This means that intelligence reports, while not organized in an easily accessible manner, are usually not censored or blacked out when one does stumble upon them. Most wartime materials have been declassified, and where individual documents *were* blacked out, I was often able to find stray duplicates in the serial correspondence of the Foreign Office. As Yigal Sheffy has pointed out, many of the gaps in the paper trail are due to the actually ad hoc nature of intelligence collection in the Middle East in this early period and to the deliberate efforts to keep information within “a small circle of privileged functionaries ‘in-the-know’”—I am partly after the history of these methodological predilections.<sup>27</sup> Interwar intelligence documents might have posed a more difficult problem, as it was then that the permanent peacetime organizations of MI5 and MI6 fully came into their own. Indeed, files containing documents about such arrangements sometimes end abruptly, with the final decisions impossible to uncover. The enduring exceptionalism of intelligence practices in the Middle East, however, ensured that MI6 (then known as the Secret Intelligence Service) became active in the region only toward the end of my period, so that methodical mining of other departmental papers has proved successful for the postwar era as well. I have juxtaposed this wealth of official documents with personal papers and published works by the same individuals as well as novels, periodicals, publications of scholarly societies, and other contemporary literature relating to the questions these officials and agents were interested in. This range of archival material has enabled me to trace the epistemological change that marked official and popular thought about Arabia in this period, as well as some of the broader cultural, institutional, and political ramifications of that change. Still, this is a method not unrelated to the story at hand, as we shall see in the conclusion.

Of course, the very meaning of “intelligence” continued to change throughout this period, partly as a result of increased professionalization. In the beginning, it referred to information of any kind—whether secret or not—gathered by Britons of any kind for their government’s perusal. By the end of the period, it included counterintelligence and deception and possessed a considerable military dimension. Part of my effort in this work is to trace the evolution in British understanding of and accommodation to the more violent and “ungentlemanly” aspects of intelligence-gathering.<sup>28</sup>

Let me also provide some geographical definitions. “Arabia” is a classical word whose initial and terminal “a’s” seem to gesture in their purity of tone and open-endedness to all that is romantic, past, magical, and far away. The Britons I examine strove repeatedly to define the term but continued to use it imprecisely without much compunction, for what was the use of being precise about a region of shifting sands and people? Time and again, avowed experts on the region refrained from specifying its borders; some frankly stated, “no definite boundaries exist.” The crudest definition was that it was the region made up of “all those eastern races which speak Arabic,” an area inaccurately delimited as that between the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, and the line of the Tigris and the Persian Gulf. Some urged that the term be used to refer to a somewhat more expansive “Arabia of the Qu’ran.” For many Britons, “Arabia” was the “land of Holy Writ, from Jerusalem to Babylon, and from Babylon to Shush.” The one thing that was clear was that its “mentality” and “civilization” were vastly different from India’s. It gestured to the sublime in a way that India and even Persia could not; comparing it to the latter, Lawrence judged it “the better”: “Persia is all hills and looks wet.” All other bounds remained contentious. At times, Yemen was the quintessence of Arabia, at times “a world apart.” Some agents determined Anatolia was neither ethnographically nor geographically part of Arabia but still thought of Constantinople as the gateway to Arabia, a political and spiritual capital for Arabs who might never venture elsewhere in Anatolia. Egypt and the rest of North Africa were also off and on part of this imaginary; Cairo, like Constantinople, figured as an island city where Arabs mixed with others in a borderland. In general, “Arabia” connoted a vaguely defined desert domain of Bedouin; it had coasts—on the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf—but near the Mediterranean it became something else. In intelligence contexts, it initially bled into Africa and Persia but was eventually reined in from those regions for practical reasons. Defining it was ultimately deemed a somewhat “academic question,” for topographic and ethnographic continuity belied any attempt at drawing lines in the sand. During the war, however, the problem acquired a practical urgency. If more people began to appreciate the question, the answer

remained elusive, with dire consequences that are still being played out. I am referring here to the infamous correspondence in which Henry McMahon, the British high commissioner in Cairo, and Sherif Hussein, ruler of the Hejaz, attempted to define the borders of the “Arabia” that Hussein’s followers would inherit in exchange for their help in ousting the Ottomans from the region. The deliberate imprecision of these exchanges ensured that various powers in the Middle East would remain in intractable disputes ever after. To be sure, the borders were only vaguely defined partly because they were only vaguely known—ignorance serving Machiavellian politics. It became, in Lawrence’s wry phrase, “indiscreet only to ask what Arabia is.”<sup>29</sup>

“Arabia” was, however, a word with more than a cartographic definition. It was a geographic and cultural imaginary, “a country of the mind more real than any place on a map,” as Kathryn Tidrick puts it. In what follows, I use the word in that cultural sense, as a signifier for the land of mirage, myth, and imprecise borders that the British imagined it to be, but when I speak of the places in which the practical effects of its influence on the British imagination were felt, I am referring essentially to the region comprising present-day Jordan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, but most especially Iraq, as I track the gaze of the postwar British state homing in on what it took to be the “key to the future” and the centerstage of global conflict. I venture into Egypt, Palestine, and Lebanon only when the agents’ activities in the wider region take them there. Kurdistan also lingers at the margins of this story, reflecting its position in the geographic imaginary of Arabia.<sup>30</sup>

The “Middle East” was an equally fraught neologism that tended to spill willy-nilly over the borders it was assigned. Coined in 1902 by the American Captain Mahan in the British *National Review*, it referred to “those regions of Asia . . . bound up with the problems of Indian . . . defence.”<sup>31</sup> Those exercised by the newly christened “Middle Eastern Question” were at pains to explain why they could not refrain from investigating the Young Turks, Korea, and Persia too, given the impossibility of confining the “political interests of the Middle East within their geographical boundaries.” Indeed, at the most fundamental level, the “Question” was inspired by the region’s dangerous lack of geographical discipline. The East “all hangs together,” in the epigrammatic words of Gertrude Bell. Sir Mark Sykes warned his colleagues in Parliament in 1913: “The break-up of the Ottoman Empire in Asia must bring the powers of Europe directly confronting one another in a country where there are no frontiers. . . . That very awkward geographical situation troubled the mind of Alexander the Great, the mind of Diocletian and the mind of Constantine.” He thus summed up both the geopolitical quandary posed by the region and the epic proportions in which the British conceived the struggle for hegemony in it. This was “a

Debatable Land . . . prone to involve in its own unrest those responsible for the peace of the world,” warned the eminent David Hogarth; it was a no-place, a mere “thoroughfare . . . between the West and the West-in-East.”<sup>32</sup> For what it may be worth, the domain of the Middle East Department established at the Colonial Office after the war included the Arabian peninsula, the mandates in Palestine, Transjordan, and Iraq, but *not* Syria, Persia, or Egypt, although this was likely as much for practical reasons as for any pedantic attempt at precision.

The frantic efforts to define the “Middle East” and “Arabia” signal the general apprehension at the turn of the century of a new need to reckon with the region between Europe and South Asia. Up to that point, the relatively poor establishment of British military intelligence had been partially compensated by the sheer size of the empire, which stretched Britain’s diplomatic tentacles to all the corners of the world. Its enormous network of expatriates and loyal imperial citizens formed an information system critical to the empire’s power and stability. The turn-of-the-century war in South Africa irrevocably shattered faith in this ad hoc system. A protracted affair during which guerrillas almost managed to bring the British military to its knees, it made intelligence reform an urgent matter. Whitehall responded immediately with the creation of a new Directorate of Military Operations in charge of intelligence. Many of the nervously flitting eyes in this nascent security state began to settle on the Middle East, for two reasons.<sup>33</sup>

First, the rise of German power and imperial ambition had manifestly altered the geopolitical balance by the turn of the century. Germany was aggressively pursuing closer relations with the Ottoman Empire, Britain’s traditional ally, and through its dominance of the Baghdad Railway project, from which the British retreated in 1901, continually provoked British insecurities about the route to India. This was a pivotal moment: in 1904, the geographer Halford John Mackinder famously named that wedge of “Euro-Asia which is inaccessible to ships, but in antiquity lay open to the horse-riding nomads, and is to-day to be covered with a network of railways,” the “pivot region of the world’s politics.” The geopolitical centrality of the Middle East was partly heralded by the relative calm in old zones of inter-imperial contest: the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 and the Entente Cordiale of 1904 diffused Great Game tensions in Central Asia and “Fashoda mentality” in Africa.<sup>34</sup>

The second factor urging improved intelligence-gathering in the Middle East were the political rumblings within the Ottoman Empire. Burgeoning Arab nationalist movements such as Sayyid Talib’s in Basra, the rise of new provincial rulers such as Abdul Aziz ibn Saud in Najd, and the Young Turk revolution recommended diplomatic preparation for the demise of the allegedly

long “sick man of Europe,” lest, as Sykes feared, the various empires—Russia, Britain, British India, British Egypt, France, and Germany—found themselves facing each other across a no man’s land. This required knowing something about the emerging provincial powers. To be sure, the old diplomatic priorities, like the sick man, had not yet expired: an Anglo-Turkish Accord of 1901 committed both parties to the status quo. Even this, however, recommended more intensive intelligence-gathering, for, as the British chargé d’affaires in Constantinople put it, “it is somewhat hard to say at the present moment what is the true state of affairs in the Nejd.” At the same time, creeping actions behind the scenes—like the secret British arrangements with Sheikh Mubarak of Kuwait—undermined the status quo and stoked Ottoman paranoia about British commitment to the accord. The Ottomans banned British travel in the region, just when Britain was growing keen to know more about it—a move with which some British officials, long sensitive to interlopers in the North West Frontier, sympathized. That their imperial alliance was foundering was most blatantly evident in the Taba affair of 1906, when threats were exchanged during the joint effort to delineate a British-Ottoman border in the Sinai peninsula.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, the lack of knowledge about this geopolitically crucial zone was increasingly remarked after the turn of the century and the time deemed a fitting one for “taking stock of knowledge.” In 1901 and 1903, official proposals to expand intelligence into the peninsula were seriously entertained for the first time, if ultimately postponed in view of the region’s “disturbed” condition. Following the Gulf tour of Indian Viceroy Lord Curzon, a new Political Agency opened at Kuwait, specifically to address intelligence needs, and the Indian government’s twin projects of the *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman, and Central Arabia* and a new map of Arabia were launched. Geographical exploration of Arabia received a new impetus. Douglas Carruthers, a naturalist and agent who traveled in the peninsula in 1909, would later write:

The era of the Great Arabians from Ibn Batuta to Doughty and Huber was complete in itself. There followed a long pause during which no voice spoke of the great desert peninsula. . . . Unwittingly I was to open up the second phase of Arabian exploration, which culminated eventually in the part Arabia played in the Great War, and the almost exaggerated interest aroused since then in all things appertaining to Arabia.

Arabia emerged on, indeed dominated, the British stage in the period after the turn of the century. It is thus then that I begin my story.<sup>36</sup>

The turn of the century also signaled a new era for Britons at home. The end of the South African War and of Victoria's reign heralded a new epoch. The incipient rise of the new security state was formalized with the 1909 foundation of the secret service and the 1911 Official Secrets Act. Mirroring the new appreciation for the need to develop British intelligence systems, the spy emerged for the first time as a heroic figure in novels like Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) and Erskine Childers's *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903), entwining his cultural and institutional careers from the outset. These developments were part of a new cultural fascination with investigation, also manifest in journalism, social investigation, and police work. One of the period's most prominent social investigators, the playwright Florence Bell, was stepmother of the agent Gertrude Bell, with whom she carried on an intimate correspondence throughout the period (her edited volumes of Gertrude's letters appeared after the latter's death in 1926). Her husband, the steel magnate Hugh Bell, introduced Gertrude to travel in the Middle East. Gertrude's *The Desert and the Sown* and Florence's study of Middlesbrough, *At the Works*, both appeared in 1907. This was by no means an exceptional coincidence. After the war, the agent Wyndham Deedes embarked on social work in the slums of Bethnal Green. And, as we know, late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century investigators of urban Britain drew on the vocabulary of imperial explorers and were invested in tactics of cultural immersion, masquerade, and "intrapsychic incorporation," as Judith Walkowitz has put it. This taste for deceptive practices was but London's homage to the investigatory world from which they were seen to have derived and which was their primary setting. The whole culture of turn-of-the-century social investigation was orientalized, as Seth Koven has recently pointed out: "street arab" and "nomad" were common synonyms for the homeless, and incognito investigators dubbed their work "going 'Haroun Al Raschid,'" after the Baghdadi caliph of the *'Arabian Nights* who nightly masqueraded as a poor man to learn more about his subjects' needs.<sup>37</sup>

Despite these tactical similarities, intelligence-gathering in the Middle East remained a world apart epistemologically. As Walkowitz points out, social investigatory work of this period continued to aspire to the " 'grand tradition of English empiricism', which assumed that facts spoke for themselves, that they were perceived by the senses and gathered by an impartial mind." It remained allied with the classificatory impulse that drove the rising interest in criminology and anthropology as disciplines integral to the process of defining social and cultural identity.<sup>38</sup> The agents in this book were certainly also animated by a positivistic ambition, but one adulterated by other intellectual motives: their very desire to travel in a region that seemed to defy all fixity in its places, persons, and information was the mark of their engagement with the cultural and

epistemological questioning of an avant garde increasingly suspicious of Victorian positivism. That their intelligence project was shaped by the intellectual trends that informed new attitudes toward knowledge more generally is one of the arguments I press in this book, although the agents themselves were always careful to attribute their methodological choices to the stage on which they worked. Their work thus acquired its own cultural significance as a special, Arabian strand of contemporary grappling with epistemological questions.

While these various domestic and international factors set the stage for the start of this story of intelligence-gathering in Arabia, its end remains elusive. At some level, we are still witnessing its unfolding climax, as similar fascinations with Arabia continue to guide both the tactical imagination governing the U.S. and British war in the Middle East and the post-9/11 conversation about the apparent practical and epistemological peculiarities of intelligence-gathering there. Nevertheless, the tale of the *genesis* of the unseeing British state in the Middle East unfolded in a discrete time period and distinct social, cultural, economic, and political context, before its repercussions began to echo down the tunnels of time. This was the period when Britain was paramount in a region of inchoate states, before the political and economic crisis of 1931, before Iraq joined the League of Nations as an ostensibly independent country in 1932, and before the emergence of the modern state of Saudi Arabia and the rise of the American star in the peninsula in 1933. These events were all linked in some way to the emergence of oil as the central geopolitical concern in the region.

Certainly, oil had long been a growing concern, motivating much of the imperial interest in the region. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company on the Persian Gulf was an asset requiring protection immediately upon the outbreak of war in 1914; the suspected oil wealth of Mosul ensured its inclusion in British-mandated Iraq after the war; oil concessions were a critical component of the negotiations leading to Iraq's "independence" in 1932; and foreign oil prospectors were a constant source of unease to British officials anxious to maintain exclusive surveillance of the region. However, oil began to flow in Mosul only near the end of our period, was discovered in Saudi Arabia only in 1933 under American auspices, and remained a decidedly secondary factor—after the Bolshevik threat and the security of the route to India—among those that made the Middle East a crucial sphere for intelligence-gathering in the early twentieth century. When Britons talked about the promise of Iraqi wealth during and after the war, they were almost always talking about its agricultural potential as a restored granary of the world. In 1921, just after serving as civil commissioner in Iraq, Arnold T. Wilson attested publicly that "there is oil in Mesopotamia" but that it would be unwise to "bank too much" on it; the infrastructure required to extract it was so complicated that "we must wait, perhaps a long time."<sup>39</sup>

Bookended by the turn of the century and the turn of the imperial tide, the story will unfold in two parts. The first, covering the period through the war, describes how British hopes for spiritual, cultural, and, eventually, military redemption in the Middle East found fulfillment in the emergence of an intelligence community whose peculiar methods and unique wartime achievements shimmered with the aura of authentic heroism at a time when it was most desperately needed. Part II tells the story of the terrors unleashed when, following postwar rebellion in the region, the scales fell from the eyes of the British state and public. As hopes for redemption were dashed, the petrified British state turned to the agents for help in devising a regime of terror in the Middle East, and the British public began to fear for the soul of their state.

# I

## The Foundations of Covert Empire

As the Pentagon takes on new roles collecting intelligence, initiating information operations and conducting other “self-assigned missions,” . . . some embassies have effectively become command posts, with military personnel in those countries all but supplanting the role of ambassadors in conducting American foreign policy.

—*New York Times*, December 20, 2005

The new focus on intelligence resulted eventually in the 1909 establishment of a Secret Service Bureau under Mansfield Smith-Cumming (“C”), in charge of overseas intelligence-gathering, and Vernon Kell (“K”), in charge of domestic counterespionage. The Middle East, however, remained beyond the pale of this system. With official efforts to gather intelligence constrained by the policy of maintaining the status quo, intelligence in Arabia went underground rather than simply undercover. Its practitioners emerged from a variety of backgrounds because the British were interested not only in military and diplomatic developments in the Ottoman Empire but also in the ethnography, territories, history, and languages of the various political forces likely to emerge from its rubble, if and when it crumbled. In the shadow of official policy, in a semicovert and thus semiautonomous sphere, the diplomatic, administrative, and military representatives of the Indian and British governments and an assorted group of civilians formed a community whose bonds crossed departmental lines and whose common interest succeeded in emasculating official directives against

intriguing in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> This chapter describes the coalescence of this community before and during the war; their methods and objects will be the focus of a later chapter.

### The Prewar Intelligence Community

As elsewhere, the administrative machinery of the empire was the primary source of intelligence on the Middle East, but there the overlap of the administrative spheres of the London and Indian governments complicated things: the Indian government's Residencies and Political Agencies were, in many cases, also posts in the British government's Levant Consular Service.<sup>2</sup> This service extended to Ottoman Europe in the north, the Arabian peninsula in the south, Morocco in the west, and Mesopotamia in the east. Now, consuls everywhere were responsible for producing commercial intelligence and protecting British citizens in their districts, but in the Ottoman Empire they were also entrusted with political functions, including collection of political intelligence, normally left to the more prestigious diplomatic service—since working with “Oriental” authorities in any capacity was held to require “all the tact and intimate knowledge of men that are supposed to be the essential qualifications of the trained diplomatist.” Officials also gained flexibility by serving two masters; the Baghdad Residency, for instance, had been established in the eighteenth century to serve intelligence needs generated by Great Power rivalry, and when London incorporated it in the consular service in the 1830s, it retained its original functions. Consulates in the Ottoman Empire were also larger, more numerous, and more lavishly appointed than could be justified by the needs of the few British people in the region because of the extraordinary judicial and administrative responsibilities stipulated under the Capitulations and the perceived need for frequent consular intervention in a society not “constituted on the basis of European civilization.” The range of new developments that required watching and the closure of the area to most European travel made the consuls even more vital to intelligence. “I trust that the momentousness of the parting of the ways which has been reached in the history of the Middle East will be held to justify my remarks,” J. G. Lorimer, consul-general at Baghdad from 1910 to 1914, prefaced one of his many unsolicited reports. “They perhaps go beyond the ordinary scope of a local representative.” The Levant service emerged in this period as the most prestigious service for prospective recruits; new consulates were opened with alacrity all over the region.<sup>3</sup>

The very density of the consulates helped transform them into intelligence centers. Having little to do—few Britons to assist—consuls filled their time

with intelligence, at times creating minor diplomatic incidents. “I often wish we had no vice consul at Mosul,” wrote the chargé d’affaires in Constantinople, for he “has nothing to do and so gets into scrapes . . . and all with the best intentions in the world.” In a manner recalling their predecessors on the Indian frontier, bored consuls frequently endangered the official policy of non-entanglement. Still, the Foreign Office felt consuls could with considerable impunity attend to certain intelligence tasks, such as geographical surveying, which it considered, somewhat disingenuously, a harmless scholarly task. Crucial as it was that a consul “not be caught by the Turks sketching fortresses or making maps even in his own consular district,” it was also true, the ambassador explained to the foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, that “the case of one of HM’s [His Majesty’s] consular officers undertaking a journey within . . . his own district is very different from that of a British military officer travelling in Mesopotamia for a special purpose . . . which may . . . give rise to a certain amount of suspicion in a country . . . as sensitive to the idea of foreign penetration as Turkey.” By quietly relying on consuls for intelligence, the Foreign Office rendered the ban on military officers in Mesopotamia a merely formal gesture. Hesitating to admit topographical work was objectionable, the office pushed it into the realm of undercover work because it was, after all, objected to.<sup>4</sup>

Consuls took enthusiastically to this work, taking it well beyond the realm of their tours. We find, for instance, the Baghdad consul asking a friend, “a scientific man and not a politician,” to pick the brains of the officers on a Hamburg American ship he would board in Basra and transmitting the resulting notes on German designs to the Foreign Office. Consuls called on their staffs and each other for such sleuthing purposes and took initiative in mapping and recording conversations with Great Power rivals. Some developed enduring relationships with informants reporting on various Arab potentates and German agents.<sup>5</sup>

To these agents, there remained a blurry but critical line between such work and “intrigue,” between being a spy and an agent provocateur. Their object, the secret collection of information about commerce, geography, and politics, remained unimpeachable, unlike that of their rivals—gathering information with a view to *altering*, rather than merely observing the situation. In view of the Anglo-Turkish Accord, the avowed object of British intelligence was merely ascertaining the “status quo,” despite the fact that their new interest in gathering intelligence stemmed from a perception that the status quo was in great flux. When a sheikh from Hofuf sought British protection in an uprising against the Turks, the political agent in Bahrain explained haughtily that it was not his government’s custom to intrigue with the subjects of a sovereign, friendly state but added that the sheikh could write to him, for “I would be glad

always to receive any authentic news of the interior.” Hence also the objections of the government’s Gulf resident at Bushire to sending an intelligence agent to Najd: even if he were sent “without any political mission,” the Turks and local potentates would see it as an open commitment to Ibn Saud. Such scruples, British officials thought, separated them from the rest: the vali of Basra complained to the consul, F. E. Crow, of the Arab nationalist Sayyid Talib’s incessant “consorting with foreign consuls to bring about a state of things which will end in a revolution.”<sup>6</sup>

Still, it was disingenuous of Crow to presume that the vali’s denunciation excluded him, for, when a sheikh of the Beni Lam visited him in secret to request British protection against the Turks, he was hardly discreet in his enthusiasm, warning his superiors that “a rebuff might cost us dearly if their plans materialize.” Indeed, British consuls were not always successful in keeping to the straight and narrow in intelligence-gathering, as others noted: Lorimer at one point took an American consul and engineer on tour to show them his work was “of a perfectly open and above-board character” and dispel the impression “that it consists chiefly in political intrigues—Heaven knows for what purpose—with Arab sheikhs and Persian mujtaheeds.” However, as he knew well, the vice-consulate at nearby Karbala had been established in 1903 for the very purpose of acquiring influence over the Persian mujtahids there, and thus over Persia. So it is no surprise that consuls’ frequent protestations about the innocent nature of their travel and talk did not impress Turkish officials, whose suspicions were potent enough to interfere with even their ostensibly legitimate work. Consuls convinced themselves, at least, that they merely *appeared* to intrigue because of Arabs’ inveterate habit of drawing them into subversive conversations to elicit sympathetic responses, which they broadcast “in a garbled form.”<sup>7</sup>

“Special duties” did disrupt the consuls’ regular work. The Foreign Office defended Lorimer against the Lynch Steamship Company’s complaints of his lengthy absences (approximately half the year) by explaining that they were due to special duty rather than incompetence or neglect. At times, however, the Foreign Office did express unease about the increasing intimacy between consuls and the military intelligence establishment, which threatened to upset their own more delicate manipulation of their men on the spot. One such official insisted, “I don’t think military attachés should call on consular officers for information, to obtain which they have to make hazardous journeys, without the knowledge of the head of the mission.” But consuls were themselves committed to an intelligence-gathering role: the particular journey the official objected to was *not* in fact undertaken at the military attaché’s illicit request but on the consul’s own initiative. As the distinctly unrepentant consul put it,

“Consuls have often to make journeys in wild regions where no one else would go.” The Foreign Office’s prudish attitude toward intelligence-gathering further obscured the position of the Levant consuls, leaving much of the initiative to them, and pushing the work further undercover, so that even the Foreign Office did not know who directed it.<sup>8</sup>

The consul and political agent at Kuwait, Captain William Shakespear, was central to the tightening of the community of Middle East intelligencers across departmental and governmental lines. The remarkable expertise of his tour reports and his success at establishing friendly relations with local sheikhs attracted the attention of Indian Army intelligence officers in Simla, who requested, “If you have an opportunity of doing anything when you happen to be on tour we shall be very much indebted for your efforts.” The Indian government informed the Gulf resident, “Political Officers may correspond with Intelligence Branch on matters relating to a) details of routes, b) enquiries of a specially secret character respecting persons employed . . . for reconnaissance purposes.” Shakespear’s connection with Simla put the imperial intelligence work of political agents on a more regular footing.<sup>9</sup>

So too did Lorimer’s *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman, and Central Arabia*, an encyclopedic project undertaken by the Indian government to update its information on the Middle East. Ultimately running to thousands of pages and encompassing a historical section and a geographical dictionary, it was the impetus behind the surge in consular touring in the period. Percy Cox, as Gulf resident, helped Lorimer coordinate the project, asking local officials to send him copies of their tour reports. The iterative process tightened the bonds between the nascent community of consuls and Indian political officers. For instance, for the Iraq section Lorimer first toured Zubair, Basra, Baghdad, Musaiyib, Karbala, and Hillah, then added information gathered by Colonel L. S. Newmarch, Baghdad resident in 1905, and other consuls in Iraq. The resulting draft of the topographical article was sent to local officers and the embassy for revision, producing so much new material that the entire work was redrafted and revised by the new resident, Major Ramsay. The imperial bureaucracy provided a framework in which local information acquired its proper significance and place, while personal contacts, frequent rotation in posts, and tours of contiguous hinterlands generated an increasingly full map and fostered independent communication networks among regional officials. Shakespear was frequently in touch with Lorimer “through a newsletter which circulated only to the most trusted of their colleagues.” The Basra consulate remained in “demi-official” touch with Lorimer and Shakespear, who was also in regular contact with the Royal Indian Navy in the Gulf and with Colonel Francis Richard Maunsell, the former military attaché in Constantinople now

employed at the Directorate of Military Operations (DMO), although mostly to be found in the map room of the Royal Geographical Society. The *Gazetteer* also provided cover for more illicit missions such as the otherwise unauthorized peninsular exploration by Captain F. Fraser Hunter of the Survey of India. Lorimer himself took advantage of the opportunity to explore sensitive political questions. "I have been put on another job outside the gazetteer," he told Cox in 1906, "one however which works in with one of my appendices, viz., that on religions: the subject is pan-islamic activity." He soon roped other consuls into this project. The community was developing its own investigative momentum, agenda, and methods of communication.<sup>10</sup>

Military organizations, as already suggested, were fast becoming part of this mix. Despite the commitment to intelligence reform, a peacetime military intelligence corps remained elusive as long as the British military establishment (unlike the French and German) remained unsure who its next enemy would be. In the interim, the military attaché at the embassy was, in the words of Alfred Vagts, "the most advanced, most open, most permanent observer for his home service abroad," and Constantinople was the fulcrum of the imperialist competition these agents waged. Although attachés were generally not expected to engage in "secret service," this rule was not strictly enforced in Constantinople, where British attachés were known to travel extensively and provide considerable information to their government. Maunsell, attaché from 1901 to 1907, was critical to the invigoration of intelligence in the Ottoman Empire. He coordinated compilation of the DMO's new *Military Report on Syria*, which replaced the old *Military Report on Arabia*. His successor, Major Tyrell, also interpreted his job description loosely, acting unilaterally in his relations with consuls and the ambassador, who invariably excused—even facilitated—his unauthorized trespasses into the diplomatic domain.<sup>11</sup>

Maunsell compiled the secret guide in collaboration with the Admiralty, the honorary attachés at the embassy (of whom more later), and a handful of other agents best described as "special duty" officers, usually run by the DMO but as likely affiliated with Cairo or Indian intelligence or the Admiralty. When, in 1907, the Indian chief of staff intimated "an opportunity 'for non-official travellers to explore inner Arabia,'" particularly civilians traveling as businessmen, the DMO turned primarily to military officers on leave, such as Gerard Leachman of the Royal Sussex Regiment, who had just arrived in London overland from India. He was followed by the naturalist Douglas Carruthers, Captain C. M. Gibbon of Simla intelligence, Richard Meinertzhagen from Quetta Staff College, Ely Soane (formerly of the Imperial Bank of Persia and at one time a vice-consul in Persia), Captains S. S. Butler and Leycester Aylmer from East Africa, Indian Army officers Norman Bray and Hubert Young, Captain Stewart

Newcombe of the Royal Engineers, and several others. These individuals often traveled under the cover of the Survey of Egypt. Indeed, Middle Eastern policy and intelligence was, to be entirely precise, caught between three rather than two imperial governments: Lord Kitchener, the Egyptian high commissioner, and Reginald Wingate, sirdar of the Egyptian Army, together directed an intelligence network extending all over Africa and western Arabia. Special duty officers from Egypt were also likely to travel under cover of the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF), whose devotion to the study of the Holy Land compelled its support of military contributions to that study—it had sponsored Kitchener’s survey of Sinai in the 1870s, a treasure for Biblical scholars *and* military geographers. Special duty agents, positioned by their status and geographies in the interstices of the military establishments of India, Britain, and Cairo, formed the nomadic core of the Middle East intelligence community. To be sure, British intelligence in other parts of the world, like Germany, was also conducted semiofficially and by amateurs, even within the overarching organization under C. What set the Middle East community apart were its interdepartmental and intergovernmental ties, which allowed agents to draw on a wide array of institutional resources and establish their own contacts, priorities, and distinctive techniques. Just as the world’s great empires collided in the Middle East, so too did the governments of the British Empire, and out of that collision emerged a contact zone for various functionaries with overlapping interests in intelligence about Arabia.<sup>12</sup>

Instructions issued to these officers demanded silence about their true assignments. The officer “should understand that he . . . can only be considered as traveling on his private affairs.” Given the casual nature of intelligence-gathering and intelligence employments, it is difficult to discern which officers were thought of as agents, as opposed to ordinary officers patriotically passing on information that happened to come to hand. The naturalist G. Wyman Bury said paradoxically of his work in Aden, “I was traveling unofficially (in connection with certain matters pertaining to Intelligence).” Although agents’ work was undertaken “on behalf of the government,” they were, as Bury put it, “invariably without official sanction and liable to repudiation if involved in difficulties, even when actually carrying out government orders or instructions.” Needless to say, they also usually went without special pay since most were technically “on leave.”<sup>13</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the Foreign Office was not entirely supportive of these War Office interlopers. While it expected diplomats to collect intelligence from within their offices, through their intercourse with their foreign counterparts, and by limited touring, it looked less benevolently on intelligence work of a purely footloose sort. Its sensitivity to Turkish suspicions caused it on several

occasions to refuse even those requesting permission to travel for ostensibly unobjectionable purposes, fearing not only that such journeys “might act as an encouragement to other travellers, with less innocent objectives in view,” but that “an assumed obligation to protect [the prospective traveler] might serve the Porte as a pretence for asserting or reviving claims in portions of Arabia which HMG [His Majesty’s Government] do admit them.” The Foreign Office could not risk exposing the fraud of British support of the Ottomans. The case of Captain Teesdale illustrates how widely the Foreign and War Office views diverged: When a Turkish gunboat caught him wandering around Mesopotamia in Arab dress, the Foreign Office asked the India and War offices to deny all permission for such journeys in the future; but Tyrell, articulating War Office priorities, commended Teesdale’s enterprise, urging his name be “noted for employment on this sort of work in Turkey, should the occasion arise.” Perhaps more importantly, the thing to note here is Teesdale’s very presence in the region, which testifies to the intelligence community’s collective ability to circumvent the interdepartmental contest for control over the gates to Arabia. As Baghdad resident in 1910, Lorimer reported several “tours by British military officers” stoking Turkish suspicions, “the more so that Mr. Leachman and Capt. Teesdale avoided observation as much as they could and wore Arab clothes”; two years later he reported, “British officers continue to arrive here on leave, and I generally know nothing of their presence in the country until they have left Basrah for Baghdad.”<sup>14</sup>

These officers had used various ploys to circumvent Foreign Office orders. For instance, when Leachman was chosen as London’s agent to Riyadh, rather than go through the proper channels—apply to Gulf Resident Cox for India’s and London’s unlikely approval—he met with Cox, then on leave in London, and arranged for Shakespear’s private assistance near Kuwait. He departed with the authority of the War Office and the Indian General Staff and without having consulted the Foreign Office. This kind of subversion strengthened the unofficial bonds among the community of Middle East intelligencers, who saw it only as patriotism pragmatically exercised. Thus, in 1914, when Ibn Saud, trusting in Shakespear’s then unofficial standing, showed the latter his confidential correspondence with local rivals, Shakespear passed his notes of the meeting to Whitehall, despite the fact that he had had to struggle against official obstruction to make the trip. His accompanying letter explained, “I did my best to discourage his confidence, seeing that I had no official status, but as he insisted they may now be useful.”<sup>15</sup>

Determined agents also took advantage of the divided loyalties produced by the peculiar overlap of the Levant Consular Service with the Indian Political Service. Many consuls were willing to circumvent Foreign Office orders and

facilitate illicit intelligence-gathering by taking shelter in the administrative blind spot created by imperial overlap. When the vali of Basra asked the consul, Crow, what Leachman was doing near the Shammar camp, Crow covered with: "He's an English dervish studying botany in the desert." DMO agents such as Norman Bray and Hubert Young began their researches by consulting local consuls; from Karachi to Baghdad, Leachman stayed with the consul at each stopping place, wandering into the desert from these safe havens. Lorimer was especially instrumental to such journeys, despite his concern about Turkish sensitivities: he had tried earnestly, he reported in 1910, to *prevent* the sudden departure at the vali's insistence of an Indian officer who had arrived in Baghdad to study Arabic and conduct surveys. He also dealt leniently with Teesdale and Leachman, despite the ambassador's request that they be suitably rebuked. He regularly recommended Leachman's reports to the Foreign Office as highly exciting and informative, affirming "[Leachman's] journeys have no other motive than love of travel and adventure." In one instance, he shielded Leachman and another officer by assuring the vali they were merely tourists and would avoid "the unprofitable discussions into which Arabs sometimes sought to draw them." Oddly, given that travel was still banned in the region, he hoped this assurance would end suspicion of officers "who are merely traveling within...the three vilayets or...on their way to Europe." In 1911, two more officers from India, apparently unaware of the prohibition against visiting Mesopotamia on leave, roamed freely, for, Lorimer explained, they had arrived before he knew of their coming and he had therefore not felt obliged to restrain them. The first, Gregson, was with the Punjab Police, employed on the Gulf arms blockade, and the second, Captain J. C. More, performed translation duties with the Indian General Staff; both later served in wartime intelligence. In 1912, Lorimer reported the arrival of two more traveling officers who were unaware of having transgressed any regulation and to deter whom he again did nothing.<sup>16</sup>

The Foreign Office was thus concerned not only with military authorities' transgressions but also with legitimate officials' disregard for their instructions. Shakespear proved to be one of the most intractable, and not merely because of Simla's blandishments. The breadth of his wanderings increased inexorably, as did the slack between his and the official line of noninterference. He was personally so intrigued by the new political force represented by Ibn Saud that he stole away on several occasions to meet him, without reference to his superiors and fully aware he was acting against his orders. By wartime, the Foreign Office suspected him and Cox of "all sorts of designs."<sup>17</sup>

Upon closer inspection, however, it appears that these agents connived to evade the Foreign Office with the Foreign Office's knowledge and perhaps even

tacit approval. In 1910, when Stewart Newcombe, a Cairo staff officer on special duty, applied to travel in Mesopotamia, ostensibly to carry out irrigation and railway surveys, the Foreign Office deprecated the visit in view of Turkish suspicions. When he reapplied, asking merely to travel as a private individual, the Foreign Office remarked shrewdly, "We may assume that the purposes of the journey remain unchanged though the form of the application is modified." This suggests the Foreign Office knew the DMO was behind avowedly "private" requests and that some of the officers who slipped by must have done so because the Foreign Office turned a blind eye. This was not interdepartmental subterfuge; the intelligence community was being *allowed* to act autonomously, fulfilling unofficially tasks the Foreign Office could not consent to officially. While the Foreign Office was careful to ensure that it was, to all *official* appearances, doing its best to bar prospective travelers and agents from entering Ottoman territory, it knew some slipped by and, when push came to shove, protected them from the wrath of the Turkish government by retroactively upholding the fiction that their missions were harmless tourist and scientific enterprises. The very fact that officers continued to arrive in Basra and Baghdad without difficulty and apparently entirely unaware of the prohibition suggests the prohibition was somewhat nugatory. Stray remarks on particular cases betray this position. When Bury contrived to reach the desert in 1909, an India Office official noted privately that there were "obvious advantages to shutting our eyes" but that they had to act lest official silence be construed as consent. In 1905, when Turkish officials suspected Lorimer and Lieutenant Gabriel of designing to visit Najd to encourage Ibn Saud to resist a Turkish expedition gathering at Najaf, the British chargé d'affaires, having consulted the Foreign and India offices who were equally in the dark about the officers' plans but considered it entirely possible that they *could* be en route to Najd, whatever their approved itinerary, indignantly asserted that they were only collecting topographical information. The Foreign Office knew the community of intelligence-gatherers was silently, unofficially pursuing its goals, without their official knowledge but presumably with the unofficial knowledge of local consuls.<sup>18</sup>

The Foreign Office tolerated these missions because of its own desperate need for intelligence. They thought it "most unlucky," for instance, that Teesdale was caught in 1910, perfunctorily reminded the War and India offices not to allow such journeys, and then devoured his report, assailing only its more technical and military than political focus. In 1914, when Shakespear finally wrested permission to travel across Arabia as a private person, he was requested on his return to comment on official correspondence about Ibn Saud and submit reports to the Foreign and India offices. The government was in such earnest denial of its knowledge of the avowed purposes of these journeys

that when Richard Meinertzhagen finally obtained permission for an *intelligence mission* in Mesopotamia, he was asked “in *return* for this permission . . . to collect information about road and river transport . . . the Railway.” It would seem that if the Foreign Office sincerely wanted to stop British officers going to Mesopotamia, they might have empowered the Basra consul to turn back officers intending to travel without permission. The basic tension governing Foreign Office behavior was that between its growing impatience of an opportunity to promote intelligence work in an increasingly restive and important region and its obligation—to both the Ottoman government and the policy of paramountcy without entanglement—to combat that volatility by refusing entry to visionary foreigners nurturing dreams of revolution in Arabia. The organic formation of an unofficial community of intelligencers resolved this tension, ironically also giving agents nurturing such dreams a wider berth.<sup>19</sup>

On the eve of war, the balance of power in Arabia began to shift as a result of Ibn Saud’s gains and Turkish losses at Hofuf and the coastal towns of Uqair and Qatif, and the Foreign Office’s official scruples diminished. It yielded without much struggle to Hubert Young’s request to travel in Turkish Arabia to practice languages for intelligence purposes. Hence also Shakespear’s authorized private journey in 1914. The office also let Lieutenant E. W. C. Noel proceed to his post as second assistant to the Gulf resident via Baghdad, as “he would derive useful knowledge and experience from the journey.” Matters were further simplified when the Turkish government recognized Ibn Saud as *mutessarif* of Najd, making visits to him legitimate. The diplomatic arm of the British government had also grown resigned to the fact that, “desirable as it may be not to throw open Central Arabia to exploration, it is probably not in the power of HMG to exclude any traveller who is determined to enter.”<sup>20</sup>

In the meantime, another breed of agent had begun to venture into Arabia. The Foreign Office ban on travel ensured that the unofficial sources that had been the staple of nineteenth-century intelligence everywhere remained all-important in the Middle East into the twentieth century. Civilians provided the intelligence community with a range of institutional resources and a conduit for the exchange of official and scholarly knowledge about the region. The need for such agents grew partly from dissatisfaction with the consuls as too locally focused and DMO agents as too suspicious to the Turks. Indeed, it is hard to identify precisely which ordinary Britons traveling through Ottoman territory were working for their government, officially or unofficially; any Englishman in the region was a potential agent, as even the officials in the region knew. The very diversity of British commercial, industrial, and diplomatic life in the region helps maintain the ambiguity surrounding these individuals. While it would be anachronistic and simply inaccurate to label all of them intelligence agents, it

is crucial to note the extent to which some of their efforts resulted in real intelligence gains to the government and the espionage-like behavior many of them indulged in just by virtue of being in the Middle East. T. E. Lawrence, for instance, collected “intelligence” about Kurdish insurgency near the archaeological site at Carchemish for reasons of “self-preservation.”<sup>21</sup>

The honorary attachés at the embassy operated somewhere between designated and voluntary intelligence officers in Ottoman territory. George Lloyd, Aubrey Herbert, and Mark Sykes were all aristocratic Oxbridge graduates on their way to illustrious political careers. All three were drawn to Constantinople for its exciting place in the unfolding drama of European rivalry. Sykes had been used to traveling in Ottoman territories since childhood and, after the Boer War, worked his connections to obtain a post there. While there, whenever he traveled, whether for personal or official reasons, he compiled intelligence reports for the Foreign Office. Through his close personal friendships with Maunsell and Ambassador Nicholas O’Conor, he also drafted many embassy dispatches and reports outside his brief. He and Lloyd continued their travels—and their reporting—after their stints at the embassy.<sup>22</sup>

Journalists and businessmen also provided intelligence. Submitting notes on the Baghdad Railway to the DMO, David Fraser of the *Times of India* explained, “They told me in the WO [War Office] that you had practically no very recent information on the Anatolian railways, so I have embodied my notes . . . in the hope that they may be useful.” The Lynch Company was sometimes the only source of information on both commercial *and* political developments in Mesopotamia. Rendel Harris of an Anglo-American industrial plant at Egin privately sent news of Kurdish unrest to Secretary Grey, assuring, “There is no need to trouble over a reply. . . . I understand that I may send you from time to time information which may lie outside the view of our Consuls.” When an American licorice exporting company sent an English representative to Mosul, the residency rejoiced that “he may be able to supply the Vice-consulate with valuable information.” The Jewish Colonization Association in Paris sent agents to explore possible settlement areas, and their reports on Mesopotamia’s economy, politics, and topography also found their way to Whitehall.<sup>23</sup>

Most legendary among civilian agents in Ottoman territory were the scholar-archaeologists whose work received a new impetus from both the European rivalry in the region and late-nineteenth-century revisions of received wisdom about the Bible. Many historians have claimed David Hogarth’s team at Carchemish, including Lawrence, Leonard Woolley, and Reginald Campbell-Thompson, was more focused on the Baghdad Railway than on digging, but many of these claims have been refuted; archaeology was not merely cover for secret service work.<sup>24</sup> Nor, on the other hand, was it entirely innocent. It was

partly funded by members of the PEF, on which Hogarth also served and which regularly underwrote intelligence activities masquerading as scholarly endeavors. Furthermore, archaeology was a prestige issue impinging on geopolitical considerations. The British ambassador saw the opening of a German vice-consulate at Mosul, ostensibly for the assistance of German diggers nearby, as a disturbing and “unmistakable symptom of the increasing interest of Germany in these regions.” As resident, Lorimer, regretting the relative lack of British archaeologists in Mesopotamia, urged the India Office to request a learned society or private munificence to step into the breach, as it was crucial that no means of establishing British interests be neglected. Unsurprisingly, then, when they eventually began to embark on archaeological explorations in earnest, diggers and scholars maintained close relations with the intelligence network. Hogarth sent Gerald Fitzmaurice, chief dragoman at the embassy and something of a self-styled spymaster, copies of his museum reports, and Grey was a childhood friend through whom he kept the Foreign Office informed about German activity. He exhorted “wandering scholars” to interpret their brief ecumenically,

for the Ottoman Empire has been shut against the West so long and so closely that... the Scholar had best take not too professional a view of his ostensible calling: maps and political reports, customs and types and folk-lore, eggs and bulbs and butterflies and rocks—all these fill his day with amateur occupations for which his professional interest is probably not the worse; for... catholicity will serve him even within the limits of Archaeology.

Intelligence-gathering fell comfortably and innocently within the wider domain of oriental scholarship.<sup>25</sup>

On at least one occasion, Lawrence and Woolley were engaged on a clearly defined military intelligence mission. In 1913, the DMO urged the Foreign Office to seek Turkish permission for an intelligence survey of Sinai by falsely applying in the name of the PEF. The PEF, which was informed only after the fact, recommended sending along an archaeologist, and the British Museum offered up Woolley and Lawrence, who remarked, “We are obviously only meant as red herrings, to give an archaeological colour to a political job.” Their subsequent friendship with Newcombe of Cairo intelligence involved them in yet another mission. On their suggestion, Newcombe visited the dig on the excuse that the trip would yield useful information. From there, he traveled to the Taurus mountains to gather information on the Baghdad Railway, writing to his friends to follow his route to fill in any gaps. On the eve of war, Lawrence and Woolley were just finishing *The Wilderness of Zin* for the PEF, which

Kitchener, then Egyptian high commissioner, had ordered “pdq, as whitewash” and which they dedicated to Newcombe for showing them, as Moses did his flock, “the way wherein they must walk, and the work that they must do.”<sup>26</sup>

Gertrude Bell’s friendships in the upper reaches of Whitehall allowed her to fuse polite travel and amateur archaeology with (unpaid) information-gathering. “Mr. Lorimer says that he has never met anyone who is in the confidence of the nations in the way I am . . . !” she wrote from Baghdad. The Foreign Office dealt with her illicit journeys in the same way that it dealt with those of renegade officials—by doing all it could, on the surface, to rein her in, while hoping she would manage to elude its reach. It was Bell’s childhood friend, Ambassador Louis Mallet in Constantinople, who first uselessly passed on official advisories against travel and, afterwards, excitedly submitted her journey report, praising her “remarkable exploit.” Such personal connections helped further the Foreign Office’s unofficial ambition to access the secrets of Arabia.<sup>27</sup>

Bell’s best friend was Hogarth’s sister Janet. This is no isolated coincidence, but a common factor behind the creation of the community of Middle East intelligence experts. The bonds that drew them together were based as much on social, class, and family as on professional relationships. Take Hogarth: through his family’s clerical connections, he was a good friend of the first director of naval intelligence, Admiral Reginald “Blinker” Hall. He also knew the head of the London School of Oriental Studies, Denison Ross, who was to become a “special advisor” on military intelligence in the Middle East. His Oxford connections opened the doors of the India Office library to him, where he researched his history of Arabian exploration, *The Penetration of Arabia* (1904), which itself became a key reference for the intelligence world. His professional ambit put him in a position to write to a publisher seeking his opinion of Bury: “I have read a long report of his, made to the Secret Service Department of the Indian Government, which was quite good.”<sup>28</sup>

Hogarth’s relationships with other archaeologists were primarily forged in the academy. He recruited Lawrence and Woolley at the Ashmolean Museum. Campbell-Thompson was a fellow at Merton College, famous for his translations of ancient Babylonian legends. Prospective diplomats and consuls also gathered at the feet of E. G. Browne, Arabic professor at Cambridge.<sup>29</sup> The academy also fostered political connections. At Oxford, Aubrey Herbert became close to Raymond Asquith, son of the future prime minister. His friendships with Lloyd and Sykes, dating from Oxbridge, carried through their parliamentary careers when he and Sykes were both members of the Conservatives’ Tuesday Club (the “Hughligans”). At Oxford, the novelist Compton Mackenzie met many of his future colleagues in intelligence, including Herbert, Woolley, and Harry Pirie-Gordon, whom he had known earlier and who went on to

gather intelligence on the Syrian coast and write for the London *Times*. Pirie-Gordon was related to Hogarth, through whom he met Lawrence, also en route to Syria.

This community also met socially. Herbert's wife regularly complained about his endless hospitality toward "drunken consuls," with whom her own fashionable set was condemned to mix.<sup>30</sup> Herbert and Lloyd were family friends of Gertrude Bell's; in Constantinople, she dined with Philip Graves, then a *Times* correspondent who also sent intelligence to Whitehall. Many of those involved in Middle Eastern politics and intelligence gathered at her home as summer guests, including the journalist and former Foreign Office hand Valentine Chirol. He had facilitated Bell's first journey to the Middle East by tapping into his network of friends among the consuls, and she sent him her travel reports, which he drew on for his editorials and supplied to government officials.

Aspiring travelers took pains to contact their forerunners in the field of Arabia exploration. In need of advice on travel in Syria, Lawrence initiated a correspondence with the legendary Charles Doughty, then an aging and impecunious poet. Bell's greatest unconsummated love affair was with Doughty's nephew, Charles Doughty-Wylie, a military vice-consul in Turkey. She was also friendly with Lady Anne Blunt in Cairo. The mutual adulation among this group is also evidenced by their incestuous authoring of biographies about one another, cited throughout this book. The exploration fraternity extended to the Royal Geographical Society, which provided an important extraofficial institutional framework for the interaction of the civilian and official components of the community. Hogarth, Bell, Bury, the Blunts, Leachman, Carruthers, Butler, Shakespear, and others were all at various times at the society—many of them nominated by each other for membership—as were key figures in the DMO's mapping section. The society's president could openly remind "English officers in distant parts of the world of the admirable opportunities they have when going on leave of exploring some hitherto unknown part of the world." Besides scholarly cover and financial backing for officially discouraged trips, the society also provided a store of expertise and references.<sup>31</sup>

The social world and institutions of this community extended abroad in the empire. In 1902, at the Delhi Durbar, Bell "met all the world." It was there, with Lorimer, Chirol, and Cox, that she learned the latest news about the peninsular feud between the Houses of Saud and Rashid. In Cairo, that other imperial crossroads, we can find Graves working for the *Egyptian Gazette* and sharing a flat with his future intelligence colleague, Ronald Storrs. Socializing between travelers and residency and consular staffs in the Middle East was also routine. At the Mohammerah consulate, Leachman met fellow DMO agent Ely

Soane and Arnold Wilson, the Indian officer on special duty in Persia and future civil commissioner in Iraq. In Constantinople, he met Shakespear, also fresh from the overland journey from India, and struck up friendships with the embassy attachés. At the embassy, the Foreign Office hand Lancelot Oliphant also joined this group, as did British advisers to the Turkish Ministry of the Interior such as Wyndham Deedes. Leachman, Shakespear, Lloyd, Herbert, Fraser, Chirol, and Bray all passed through the Gulf residency, attracted partly by Cox, who was universally admired as a great authority on Arabia. Archaeologists were integral to this network of intimates; Lawrence and Woolley were especially close with the author-consul at Beirut, James Elroy Flecker. The paths of these diggers, diplomats, and explorers also intersected in Damascus, the “gateway between East and West,” where many of them acquired guides, often the same ones. Carchemish was also a common curiosity, drawing agents and diplomats alike. So too were other archaeological sites: Bell and Hogarth had worked at different times with William Ramsay in Turkey; Lawrence for Flinders Petrie in Egypt; and Woolley knew Lord Carnarvon, also in Egypt. Now, Carnarvon was the brother of Aubrey Herbert, a central node of “the digging fraternities of Egypt, Syria and Mesopotamia.” These encounters were partly the Middle East version of the expatriate imperial social world but also the result of a deliberate effort to build a network of intelligence relationships, to exchange the information and contacts essential to successful exploration and intelligence work in Arabia.<sup>32</sup>

The very nomadism of intelligence in the Middle East strengthened ties among the agents, despite their far-flung posts and the slow travel and communication separating them. (Even fortuitous meetings in the desert were not unheard of.) As John Mackenzie writes, contemporary history was for this group “like a series of spectacular entertainments and they were often theatrical people who filled the stage they found for themselves.” Bell romped her way through the sites and celebrations of British imperial power; witness her excitement after a meeting with Chirol: “We drew out maps and discussed his Persian journey and our hidden plans. . . . We want to meet in Delhi!” The spatiality of this spectacular stage was mirrored in the agents’ relations as a community, for what bound them, and the Middle East, was their and its position at the nexus of governments, departments, and empires. Movement across it was movement across institutional lines, a lateral motion that produced a community of Middle East intelligencers with its own agenda and priorities, its own casual coordination and exchange of information, and its own archive, however spatially dispersed.<sup>33</sup>

The community mainly relied on physical mobility, telegraph, and the post to communicate. Consuls could exchange telegrams in cipher from 1910. Naval ships in the Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean also provided important

relay facilities with the connivance, especially, of the military attaché and Fitzmaurice at the embassy. Information was also communicated through the heavy circulation of certain key documents that attempted to pool together the results of the community's effort to construct a composite view of the region—like the six blind men and their elephant. Among these, Lorimer's *Gazetteer* acknowledged debts not only to consuls and agents but to the irrigation engineer William Willcocks, Lynch Company captains, Dr. Bennett of the American Presbyterian Mission, W. D. Cumming of the Indo-European Telegraphy Department, Charles Doughty, and Hogarth. Such documents testified to the existence of an intelligence community straddling the worlds of diplomacy, the military, commerce, and scholarship.<sup>34</sup>

### Wartime Evolution

Two major campaigns were fought in the Middle East during the Great War. The Mesopotamian campaign began as a small operation for the defense of Indian frontiers and British interests in the Persian Gulf. However, once at the Gulf, the Indian Expeditionary Force D began to rapidly advance north along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in a characteristic effort to shore up what it already held. After an ill-fated first attempt at taking Baghdad forced them to a disastrous retreat on Kut, the campaign was taken over by the War Office and, after capturing Baghdad in March 1917, ultimately routed the Turkish Army near Mosul. Farther west, troops guarding the Suez Canal embarked on an offensive assault in the Sinai and then into Palestine and Syria, absorbing the remnants of the Gallipoli campaign into an enlarged Egyptian Expeditionary Force and coordinating its push north with the Arab Revolt launched by Sherif Hussein of the Hejaz and led by two of his sons, Faisal and Abdullah.<sup>35</sup> Almost immediately on the outbreak of war, the informal agents' contacts opened official doors through which they passed unhindered—not the least among their champions was “their spokesman,” Lord Kitchener, the new head of the Ministry of War, whom Roger Adelson hails as “the first major figure in London to be clearly identified as an Arabist.” Cox was deputed chief political officer with the force in Basra; Shakespear was stopped on his way to France and posted as political officer on special duty under him, ultimately dispatched to Riyadh to secure Ibn Saud's friendship. The civilians too were brought under the official umbrella, the perception being that archaeologists' “familiarity with out-of-the-way localities . . . and . . . close relations, . . . more intimate, than a consul's . . . to native populations, obviously fit them for special missions.” Hogarth, through his friendship with the director of naval intelligence, landed in the

new Geographical Section of that directorate. Through Captain Deedes, who joined the DMO, Bell submitted her views to Whitehall. Woolley wrote to the Foreign Office, confident that “my name has come before you in connection with work in North Syria,” and offered his and Lawrence’s services. (He later referred rather disingenuously to his and Lawrence’s crossing of the Taurus as the reason they “were both shoved by the War Office into the Intelligence as soon as the war began.”) Lawrence, likely through Hogarth’s intervention, secured a position in the Geographic Section of the General Staff. Angling for a position through 1914, Mark Sykes finally obtained, through old Constantinople contacts, an introduction to Kitchener and a position at the DMO. As Kitchener’s personal representative on the Interdepartmental Committee on the Future of Asiatic Turkey, popularly known as the De Bunsen Committee, he attained an anomalously influential position for a junior official, on the merits of being the only one with firsthand experience of the East.<sup>36</sup>

Many of these agents soon coalesced into the intelligence departments of Sirdar Reginald Wingate’s Egyptian Army at Cairo and Indian Expeditionary Force D in Basra. By late 1914, Hogarth had arranged for Woolley, Lawrence, and Lloyd to join the Cairo staff under the command of Newcombe, plucked from the Western front for “special assignment” under Gilbert Clayton, in charge of General Staff Intelligence (GSI) at Cairo. Philip Graves and his uncle, Robert Graves, formerly consul at Salonika and adviser in the Turkish Ministry of Interior, arrived from Constantinople and provided names of “a number of British residents obliged to leave Turkey, who would be glad to give their services as Intelligence Officers and Agents, or Interpreters.” Herbert, wounded at Mons, became a staff officer. Intelligence, military planning, and other tasks were not precisely apportioned among these old friends. Through Hogarth’s and Admiral Hall’s intervention, the circle was soon completed with the arrival of Bell, who had until then been helping Lord Robert Cecil trace the wounded and missing with her old friend, Janet Hogarth. As parliamentary undersecretary for the Foreign Office, Cecil remained a key Whitehall contact for Bell and Sykes; his brother, Edward, the financial adviser to the Egyptian government, was virtually prime minister of Egypt under martial law.<sup>37</sup>

In Basra, besides the Indian cavalry and the spy networks of the sheikhs of Mohammerah and Kuwait, whose friendship Cox had long cultivated, General Headquarters relied on the embryonic intelligence section headed by Captain W. H. Beach, in whose charge were several prewar agents, including Reginald Campbell-Thompson, J. C. More, W. H. Gribbon of Simla intelligence, and Captain G. F. Eadie. Cox’s Political Department, however, seems to have been the primary site of intelligence collection. Designation aside, the political officer was first and foremost a member of the General Staff, “and only in a very

subordinate degree the local representative of the CPO [Chief Political Officer] in his capacity as head of the civil administration." Levant consuls were impressed into this service, as were former Gulf and Middle East officials from India: H. R. C. Dobbs, who had traveled in Mesopotamia and was intended consul general of Baghdad when war broke out, headed the new Revenue Department; S. G. Knox, former Gulf resident, formed the judicial system; D. L. R. Lorimer, former political agent in Bahrain and brother of the late Baghdad resident (who accidentally shot himself in 1914), was a political officer; and Reader Bullard, who had evacuated the Basra consulate at the beginning of the war, was assistant political officer under Dobbs. Experts on neighboring precincts—central Arabia, Persia, and Kurdistan—also gathered in Basra, such as Captain Noel of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and Leachman, who had been languishing with his regiment on the North West Frontier. Soane, released with other British refugees from Turkish imprisonment at Baghdad—trusting in their friendships with the provincial government, few Britons had evacuated—trekked to Aleppo and made his way to London and then Cox's staff. Some political officers were seconded from the army, including the Indian Army officers Harold Dickson, son of the former consul at Jerusalem, and Hubert Young, who arrived from the North West Frontier. The Indian Civil Service answered an urgent call for political personnel, particularly those with demonstrated linguistic ability, sending H. St. John Philby among the first batch. By the end of the year, of the seventeen "gazetted" members of the "civil administration," all but one spoke Arabic fluently and had traveled in Arabic-speaking countries. "These men...made a group whose collective knowledge was unrivalled," wrote Cox's deputy, Arnold Wilson, and under Cox's guidance, "it was possible to make their knowledge subserve our military purpose."<sup>38</sup>

Newly official and backed for the first time by the financial and material might of the empire, the wartime intelligence world nonetheless remained strikingly informal and ad hoc, fading at its edges into the familiar unofficial world of local European businessmen, Christian missionaries, former consular employees, the agents' former guides, itinerant traders in essential items like ointment for curing mange in camels, and corpse carriers—particularly ubiquitous in wartime. Agents struck by the anachronism of their disorganization in the midst of a total war marked by efficient bureaucratic coordination of massive actions periodically tried to reform their organization but had to struggle against the tendency produced under the peculiar conditions of prewar intelligence-gathering of collapsing all intelligence work into the hands of a small band of intrepid agents willing to breach official directives. Their influence grew ever larger as they claimed an ever larger domain of political matters as part of intelligence work.

From the beginning, military and political intelligence were difficult to separate. Besides keeping tabs on local sheikhs and running Arab scouts and spies, political officers were entrusted with a range of more military tasks. “Though I am nominally here for political duties,” wrote Wilson, “I have actually spent the whole time on purely military reconnaissances as I have mapped every yard of the country and know it thoroughly, and the Brigade Commanders always insist on having me with them when they go out.” At Suq al-Shuyukh, Dickson had “spys [*sic*] and agents everywhere, some . . . in touch with the centre of Arabia,” but also trained the Nasiriyah Arab Scouts and employed them on patrol work and military intelligence. The generals’ dependence on political officers like him meant “fellows are continually picking our brains and coming round for news.” The political officer was generally “of the nature semi military semi political.” Beach officially recognized the political officers’ position at “the forefront of affairs,” particularly in assisting the military system. This was partly, as many pointed out, the result of the lack of people with the requisite linguistic skills but also inevitable in a campaign between two competing imperial powers, in which the political sentiment of the occupied population was itself a factor of military consequence. Mesopotamia was the only place in the Great War where British forces were confronted with a hostile or indifferent occupied population; as one scholar puts it, “Intelligence had a different battle to fight.” As before, the nature of British priorities in the region—now, the need to “battle for hearts and minds”—tended to subsume political and administrative work into military intelligence. Thus, while, in European theaters, according to Keith Neilson, wartime intelligence entailed a conspicuous abandonment of “political, as opposed to military, intelligence,” in the Middle East, as one agent put it, it was “impossible to dissociate the Political and Military problems.” This overlap undermined bureaucratic differentiation of tasks. “A political officer’s duties are various, the underlying idea being that all dealings with the natives (except killing them) should be done through him,” wrote the political officer and historian C. J. Edmonds, formerly of the Levant Service. He had to “[interview] sheikhs who come in to submit . . . heat up the countryside to get transport, do a certain amount of intelligence work, pronounce on the value (before death) of a dead donkey, answer conundrums about the tribes at a moment’s notice as if one had been in the country all one’s life.” The political officer also functioned as a makeshift quartermaster or “universal provider”: at Amara, Leachman provided the army fresh meat, grass, firewood, transport ponies, guides, eggs, milk—“anything that anyone does not know how to get.” “I am supposed to know every Arab in the country by name and face,” he went on in exasperation, “Also exactly when the river will rise and by how much. If it is going to rain, how much? and how long?”<sup>39</sup>

Wartime exigencies and the skills agents acquired before the war meant intelligence also shaded into administration. As the Indian Army rushed north in 1915, “liberating” Mesopotamia, it created a pressing need for officials to pacify, govern, and watch the occupied regions. Cox’s duty was to keep the Indian government informed of the situation but also to set up an administration in the occupied regions through his political officers.<sup>40</sup> Administrative and intelligence work were both concerned with making Arabia legible to the emerging colonial state by surveying the land and population—particularly for tax assessment—for which both relied on political officers.<sup>41</sup> Political officers employed in the Revenue Department worked closely with their counterparts governing occupied districts; many rotated between these posts. Dobbs, the head of Revenue, regularly submitted intelligence reports. The centrality of the rivers to the fighting and their susceptibility to enemy manipulation made the services of George Buchanan, the conservator general of the rivers, equally crucial to intelligence and the work of political officers in riverain districts. The amalgamation of intelligence and administration produced a manifestly weird regime. Cox affirmed, “The [Indian] Political Branch... with this Force is performing functions which it has never had occasion to perform before in the history of the country or of the Department.” So managerial did the political officers become that their cozy arrangements with the military loosened over time. In Basra in 1916, Lawrence pronounced “Political Department” a rather “false name,” as the organization was “really a civil service... mostly taken up with administration.” Cox was high commissioner in all but name and an “absolute dictator in the Gulf.” He would take orders only from London but knew London “so well that... this is only a diplomatic way of taking no orders at all.” Despite the “strict divorce” between Cox’s and Beach’s establishments, Cox remained a colonel on the general’s staff to “preserve a fiction of control.” Moreover, he worked well with Beach “personally,” and they kept each other “au fait” with their doings.<sup>42</sup>

Such personal cooperation outside bureaucracy facilitated agents’ multi-tasking, even across the chasm between the Basra and Cairo establishments where formal cooperation was mooted by political differences and the ambiguous division of spheres between the Egyptian and Indian governments.<sup>43</sup> Continual migrations of intelligence personnel between the two establishments preserved the informality of Middle East intelligence and kept substantive decisions in that informal sphere. While Force D had mostly absorbed experts from the Indian side and Egypt those based in London—there were battles over some bodies—both sides knew each other informally from before the war. When Mesopotamian intelligencers traveled to London, they inevitably stopped at Cairo and rekindled old contacts, smoothing the exchange of

information. Hogarth, for instance, although tightly bound to the Cairo establishment, also received information from Leachman and Shakespear through the War Office, the Royal Geographical Society, and Indian Army intelligence.

This makeshift organization came under sharp scrutiny after the Gallipoli debacle and the investment of Kut at the end of 1915. Nine thousand soldiers and thousands of noncombatants ultimately surrendered to the Turks after more than twenty thousand men were lost in botched rescue attempts, heralding “the British Army’s greatest humiliation in the First World War” and that too in “the one theatre of the war where we could least afford a fluctuating standard.”<sup>44</sup> The intelligence world was thoroughly shaken up, partly to launch an Arab revolt that would break the deadlock in the East and inextricably link the affairs of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and India. Sykes’s influential position in London was critical in the design of the new intelligence regime. In 1915, he embarked on a special War Office mission to report on the military and political situation throughout the East. His peregrinations through the imperial bureaucracy stretching between the Mediterranean and East Asia convinced him of the need for unified intelligence organization *and* unified policy for the Middle East. He was as impressed with the long-distance connections between anti-Turkish groups in the region—a perception I will have more to say about later—as with British officials’ isolation from each other in “water-tight compartments” held apart by tortuous channels of communication (whereby Aden, for instance, had to consult with Bombay and Delhi for instructions, and they, in turn, with the India Office, which had to meet jointly with the War and Foreign offices, which had to report to the War Committee, which usually sought the opinion of the high commissioner in Egypt, who had then to report back to the Foreign Office and the War Committee, a process consuming sixteen days and some £250, according to Sykes). He urged centralization. The otherwise admirable autonomy of the man on the spot “was alright in the past when such sectors dealt with varying problems which were not related, but is bad now that each sector is dealing in reality with a common enemy.” Moreover, whatever special insight the man on the spot possessed, there were no clear channels through which he could leverage the entire bureaucratic machinery. Policy went wrong in the hands of bureaucrats; it required the expertise of *intelligence agents*. A central agency would also keep the Indian and British networks from “doing the same work twice over,” Bell affirmed. It would formalize the mingling of political and military intelligence, coordinating reports from agents in Mesopotamia, the Gulf, the Indian Criminal Investigation Department (CID), Sudan intelligence, Mediterranean Expeditionary Force intelligence, and the Athens intelligence organization. Sykes’s proposed “Islamic Bureau” at Cairo would coordinate not only intelligence, but also propaganda *and* policy in the

Middle East, laying the groundwork for a new covert empire in the hands of intelligence personnel.<sup>45</sup>

Sykes, whom a contemporary immortalized as “that strange romanticist who flitted from campaign to campaign as a half-official, half unofficial freelance,” arrived in London with his proposal in the wake of the debacles in the East and on the eve of a major government shake-up and general restructuring of intelligence that resulted in the creation of a new Directorate of Military Intelligence, under which C’s organization became MI1c (renamed MI6 in the 1930s), and K’s section, MI5. Whitehall was highly receptive to his ideas; in any case, the interdepartmental meeting in January 1916 at which his proposal was approved was made up of intimates of the community of Arabia agents, including Oliphant, Herbert Asquith, Arthur Hirtzel of the India Office, and others. The Arab Bureau’s establishment was finalized, substantially as he wanted.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the hope for order, the bureau remained an unbureaucratic bureaucracy without clear standing, so that policy on the Middle East effectively emanated from the shadowy interstices of the British government rather than from a clearly defined and accountable department. In the first place, Sykes could not find a space for it in the existing bureaucracy. It was so unique in its conception—at once a military and political intelligence, propaganda, and policy unit—that simple absorption into any existing intelligence structure proved impossible. Technically a section of the Sudan Intelligence Department at Cairo (at Kitchener’s insistence), it was formally attached to the General Staff, bankrolled by the Admiralty and the Exchequer (although staff salaries were paid by their original departments), and responsible to the Foreign Office through the high commissioner. Its operations remained so obscure that in 1923 a perplexed Public Accounts Office made inquiries at the Foreign Office, where W. J. Childs, a former agent, explained that although only “a few with inner knowledge” could divulge its “decisive” role, in general it had served as “no mere collecting . . . agency for general intelligence” but had “advised with authority upon the highest and most delicate questions affecting British policy” and diplomacy.<sup>47</sup>

This wide brief was partly the inevitable product of the habits of an intelligence community so used to a free hand and informal organization that it simply could not adapt to strict bureaucracy. Personal, unofficial contacts were fundamental to the bureau’s operation from the outset. Hogarth, its sometime head, urged that it “stay close” to GSI and retain its “indefinite status” rather than become “independent and distinct,” as it could thus cover a wider field and draw on the activities and knowledge of “several officers not strictly on its staff.” In January, when Bell was invited to India by her old friend Viceroy Charles Hardinge, Clayton encouraged her to go. A bit nervous about the responsibility,

she nevertheless reasoned, “the pull one has in being so unofficial is that if one doesn’t succeed no one is any the worse.” Moreover, her dear friend Chirol was in Delhi, “which will make everything easy.” (It was he who had convinced Clayton that she, as “a quite unimportant and unofficial person,” accept the invitation.) In the event, so successful was her informal turn at pulling “things straight a little between Delhi and Cairo” that she became convinced “nothing will ever keep them straight except a constant personal intercourse” and insisted on continual “exchange of people in the various Intell. Depts.” The bureau’s George Lloyd, deputed to Basra on intelligence, agreed on the need of “constant personal touch.” Informal communication remained the network’s *modus operandi*, not least because the bureau’s awkward fit between the profusion of existing agencies threatened to undermine the confidentiality prerogatives of each. Having paid lip service to the importance of proper communication, even Clayton considered “some unofficial channel of communication . . . desirable to send information for the private information of” the director of military intelligence. It was on behalf of Simla’s new gazetteer of Arabia that Bell next stopped in Basra although she also worked as an informal liaison for the bureau, using Beach’s bedroom as her office. There she insisted that work such as hers could not be carried out “without free and private intercourse with one’s chief” and that she “be able to write to you [Hogarth] privately about the work here, personal impressions and personal judgements which have no official value and no official weight.” Since a formal request for such an arrangement might arouse suspicions, she urged that the arrangement be allowed to come about gradually. As she squeezed herself between Cox’s and Beach’s organizations, Cox requested the wider Mesopotamian and Gulf network to cooperate with her and the bureau. Thus, functionally, the bureau was a queer mix of the formal and informal. It fulfilled Sykes’s objectives by availing itself of the material and financial resources of bureaucracy, but without subjecting itself to its hierarchical and procedural constraints. After all the minute planning for its surgical insertion into the existing bureaucracy, it evolved its own channels of communication, designed to evade the controls of the potentially paralyzing number of its sponsors.<sup>48</sup>

Constant touring also kept the bureau’s staff amorphous and fluid. Officially, Hogarth was head, but because he was often required elsewhere was soon replaced by an (equally nomadic) acting director, Kinahan Cornwallis of GSI. At one point in 1916, Cornwallis and a single clerk were left alone to man the office. But it hardly mattered: Lawrence and Graves, then at GSI, worked closely with him on propaganda and the bureau’s intelligence digest, the *Arab Bulletin*. When the bureau’s increasing dominance of diplomacy and military preparations made it such a thorn in GSI’s side that Clayton was effectively

sacked as head of GSI and the two institutions separated, GSI agents such as Newcombe, Deedes, and Woolley continued to work closely with it. Non-bureau members including J. W. A. Young at Jeddah, Lieutenant L. F. Nalder of the Sudan government at Aden, and Alfred Parker at Rabigh collected information for its handbooks. Perhaps the truest statement about the agency was Hogarth's rather portentous admission, "Well—in a sense I *am* the Arab Bureau," which assumes proper proportion when we realize that he made it at a time when he had *no official standing* at the bureau, an arrangement, he explained, designed primarily to assure Cornwallis's salary. The Treasury's discovery in 1918 that the bureau, whose budget was £3000, had been spending £14,000 annually bespeaks the agency's near autonomy, which assured its political influence, regardless of institutional change. Unlike any other intelligence staff, the bureau members devised their own campaign plan, chose their own chiefs, established and pursued their own objectives, and shaped policy at Whitehall.<sup>49</sup>

Such institutional suppleness eased the bureau's takeover of military and diplomatic work in the region. The Red Sea Patrol employed Lieutenant Nalder, who would later serve as a political officer in Mesopotamia, and G. Wyman Bury, whom the Foreign Office had in fact banned from travel in Arabia after 1909, to monitor Arab views of its blockade. It also worked closely with a new agency in Jeddah, tied elliptically to and bankrolled by the bureau. Established at the urging of Lawrence and Colonel Cyril E. Wilson, former governor of Khartoum, Port Sudan, and Red Sea Province, the Jeddah agency's ostensible purpose was to improve communication with Sherif Hussein, but it was in fact entrusted with a much larger role, "it being almost impossible to separate the military operations from the political side." Wilson was in charge (but addressed only as "Mr." or "Pasha" to avoid the impression that he was not an ordinary pilgrim officer). Advisers to the Sherifian forces—Lawrence, Newcombe, Pierce Joyce—were under his command but also had their own idiosyncratic connections to the bureau, roaming more or less free, often with nothing but their own inspiration to rely on for orders. Thus, Newcombe worked a field extending "from Yanbo North," and at one point Lawrence found himself *explaining* to Clayton, "I regard myself as primarily Intelligence Officer, or liaison with Feisul," adding that, as there was no further need for him at Yanbo, he was going to Joyce "to see if he can suggest anything worth doing." Wilson himself was technically a member of Wingate's staff but generally communicated with London through McMahon, who used him to exercise political control over the revolt. When General Edmund Allenby took command of the Palestine campaign in the summer of 1917, the Jeddah agency was absorbed into a new Hejaz Operations Staff at General Headquarters, which relieved the bureau from

responsibility for the military needs of the revolt. Nevertheless, as Bruce Westrate puts it, the two entities remained virtually “indistinguishable, with officers used almost interchangeably.” Thus, Alan Dawnay was officially chief staff officer, but Joyce, who was on Wilson’s staff but not the Hejaz Operations Staff, was officially senior British officer with Faisal’s army *and* officer commanding Hejaz operations. In any case, as Hubert Young explained with hindsight, Lawrence “really counted more than either of them with Allenby and Feisal.” By then, Lawrence had actually rejoined GSI, noting presciently that although he “should properly have no more to do with the Arab Bureau,” “so eccentric a show as ours is doesn’t do anything normal.” All this overlap was eased by Wingate’s appointment as high commissioner while retaining authority over relations with the Sherif and Hejaz operations.<sup>50</sup>

The obscurity of the bureau’s network helped it fulfill its anomalously wide brief but also tended to pull its political work out of the light of public scrutiny. It quickly became entangled with MI5, whose very existence, unlike ordinary intelligence units, was secret and whose wartime responsibilities had expanded to include oversight of imperial counterespionage, for which it was christened the Central Special Intelligence Bureau, since “special intelligence” seemed less impolitic than “counterespionage” in imperial communications. The interaction between this bureau and the community of agents in Arabia dated to 1915, when the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force had stopped in Cairo—its intelligence and map base—en route to the Dardanelles. Many Cairo agents, including Robert Graves, Herbert, Lloyd, Newcombe, and Lawrence, had temporarily migrated to Greece with the force. There they encountered many of their old friends, such as Deedes, Pirie-Gordon, and Doughty-Wylie, employed in a subbranch of the Eastern Mediterranean Special Intelligence Bureau under the Central Special Intelligence Bureau. This subbranch was founded on the networks of prewar consular officers and was headed by Major “R” (Rhys Samson, prewar military consul at Adrianople). After the Gallipoli disaster, many of R’s agents joined Cairo intelligence. Then, just as the Arab Bureau was being established, the Central Special Intelligence Bureau contacted Clayton privately to inform him of its existence and its officers’ desire for closer contact with his “‘vital intelligence center’ for the Near and Middle East.” The Eastern Mediterranean Special Intelligence Bureau was soon placed under the head of the Cairo section of MI6, apparently Colonel Holdich, also head of GSI. Eventually that bureau’s headquarters were moved from Alexandria to Cairo to “work more centrally,” creating a “New Jerusalem of Intelligence.” In short, the visible intelligence and policy-making establishments of GSI and the Arab Bureau were co-opted into the ultracovert networks of MI5 and MI6, although arrangements remained fluid and informal. As intelligence began to

widen its domain to include administration and operations planning, it also sank further into the recesses of the covert world.<sup>51</sup>

The contact zone created by informal connections between the covert and open worlds dragged intelligence's new political responsibilities into obscurity. Agents shuttling between intelligence and policy-making centers drew politicians and bureaucrats into their circle of intimates, keeping policy making diffused through an informal rather than formal network. Take, for instance, Bray's easy movement between these worlds late in 1916 when he was recalled from the Western front, briefed by Sykes, and deputed as intelligence officer under Colonel Wilson. He soon returned to London to meet with Sykes; attend a War Cabinet meeting; dine with Austen Chamberlain, the secretary of state for India, who wanted to hear all about the revolt; and discuss the revolt with the director of military intelligence and the new chief of staff, returning to Jeddah via Cairo. Cairo also deliberately sent a steady stream of visitors into Cox's domain to undermine official Indian policy. Although India grew alarmed at the invasion of "Intrusives," the oddly apt telegraphic address by which GSI Cairo was known, the visits were all sanctioned by Kitchener (until he died at sea just as the revolt was launched). In one extraordinary covert operation in April 1916, Lawrence and Herbert arrived in Basra to mix with old friends in the intelligence departments and then, with Beach, proceeded upriver to try (unsuccessfully) to bribe the Turks into releasing Kut. The director general of the Survey of Egypt claimed that Lawrence's visit—particularly his ability "to get inside the skin of the participants"—wound up infecting Beach's mapping section with the "short-circuitings of official hierarchy which the kaleidoscopic situation demanded." Such visits ensured that, despite the Indian government's efforts to emasculate the bureau's Basra branch, a remarkable amount of exchange of information, methods, and policy ideas persisted between Cairo, London, Basra, Jeddah, and Delhi. The campaigns' incompletely delineated operational spheres, partly the result of the manifest usefulness of intelligence from one theater to the other, encouraged this informal intertheater influence.<sup>52</sup>

The contest over the bureau's Basra branch illustrates the extent to which the intrusions allowed the agents to keep policy-making about Arabia in an unofficial zone. Cox was initially against the bureau as a policy center encroaching on his own sphere, and his suspicions were wise: a prototypical agency of covert empire, the bureau was determined to access the revenue and tribal information gathered by his establishment. As George Lloyd explained, the bureau preferred liaison with Cox's department rather than Beach's as the one that would remain in place after the war and the one in closest touch with civil officials "who will be left dotted about this country." Its civilian status provided long-term cover for what was projected as a long-term surveillance

project. Bell was particularly useful in this regard, Lawrence felt, as she could “work up the connections we require” with the political officers, thanks partly to “her sex and energy and lack of self-consciousness.” The bureau, like the Political Department, viewed intelligence expansively, as an advanced guard of and even enduring proxy for the imperial state. Singling out Leachman, Young, Eadie, and Dobbs—a mix of Beach’s and Cox’s men—for praise, Lawrence wrote to the bureau of their “magnificent work in keeping in friendly touch with the people, and winning their respect for our administration,” what he called the “social side” of intelligence work—“the particular province” of the bureau and the side military intelligence tended to miss. He hoped the Indian nominee for bureau liaison, Major W. F. Blaker, would serve as “a sort of pillar-box” and let Bell do the real work. Lloyd, then in Basra on intelligence, agreed Bell was the best person for the job, mainly “because *as a civilian* she more naturally works in the political department.” He cautioned against hasty “precising” of the question and defining “the actual position of the correspondent vis a vis either the military or the civil authorities here.”<sup>53</sup>

Keeping control of Arabia in the hands of agents was synonymous to these agents with keeping themselves free of Whitehall’s control. Bell, who ultimately retained the liaison position alone, confessed she preferred working in Basra, particularly as she had been given a “free hand” to recast the intelligence publications. Lloyd, who had also chivalrously offered himself for the position, was relieved at having escaped any degree of restriction—his visit was sandwiched between a flying mission to Russia and raiding in the Hejaz. Lawrence himself, who languished in GSI until the fall, ultimately used a mix of skillfully targeted pedantry and intellectual snobbery to obtain transfer to the bureau, where he found “the atmosphere of being one’s own master . . . pleasant.” These agents wanted to be “free agents.” Cox, as we have seen, seldom reported to or consulted his superiors. Leachman communicated erratically and whimsically, partly because he operated in places from which it was difficult to communicate but partly because he had a very free hand. Perhaps most tellingly, Lawrence justified his irregular communication by citing Whitehall’s own secrecy about its plans for Arabia, of which he got wind thanks only to his friends there: information came to him “not officially . . . but privately.” This was the condition of work these agents were used to: an embattled position vis-à-vis their own government, to which they adapted because of their confidence in their own authority and patriotic dutifulness. Bell transmitted volumes of confidential information in lengthy private letters to everyone from her family to the director of naval intelligence (she had her father ascertain discreetly whether the latter liked her missives) with the express aim of reforming the pervasive ignorance of the “High and Mighty” about Middle Eastern affairs. This was the style of the

Middle East intelligence world, where the personal lubricated and kept pliant a system straining under manifold bureaucratic, financial, and political pressures, a legacy of the prewar period when these agents had learned to circumvent procedural constraints to serve their vision of a greater national good. The patriotic subversiveness that had licensed illicit intelligence-gathering before the war now licensed covert policy-making. And, apparently, with considerable success: Whitehall's respect for their opinions is evident in their constant referral of even those questions concerning operations in north Persia to Cox, Bell, and Arnold Wilson, valuing their opinions, as one scholar has pointed out, "more than those of . . . personnel . . . actually in north Persia."<sup>54</sup>

Official standing only fortified their position as free agents. Witness the fallout from Bell's discreet indiscretions: A few weeks into her job, she began to find its informality uncomfortable, particularly when Hogarth published extracts of her *private* letters in the *Arab Bulletin*. Incensed at this transgression of her otherwise seamlessly unofficial existence, she reminded him that she was in Basra under Indian, if any, auspices, and that her letters were the result of a special dispensation from Cox. As the genie could not be put back into the bottle, she requested him to define her duties more clearly. Cox then made her an assistant political officer with the title "Liaison Officer, Correspondent to Cairo" and did so without seeking the bureau's approval, for, as Philip Graves later recalled, "though she took it for granted that she was a member," she had "joined the staff in Mesopotamia as a free-lance." Such was the flexibility conferred by membership in the nebulous Arab Bureau. Bell's quest for official standing was not a retreat from her freelance style but an attempt to protect it with a veneer of formality. Initially concerned that Cox's "chief motive was to give himself a much firmer hold over me," she was soon assured that her new position need neither stem the flow of her pen nor diminish her freedom of movement. It merely gave her freelance status an official impress and the backing of institutional power; she now had "the right to be lodged and fed, and looked after when I'm ill." In any case, as a rule, political officers were fairly autonomous. Bureaucracy empowered rather than constrained agents' autonomy in the Middle East.<sup>55</sup>

The new intelligence order impressed its staff with its panoptic potential. Bell was confident she could "keep an eye on all the developments in the Near East." "Our office is the clearing house through which every report and item affecting the Near East has to pass," marveled Lawrence. "The mass of Stuff is amazing, and it all fits into itself like a most wonderful puzzle. If we had only begun in peace time there would have been almost nothing we had not known." However, to Sykes, at a new desk in Whitehall, the new order's enduring informality spelled utter pandemonium for policy-making, turning it into a "perfect

babel of conflicting suggestions and views,” he grumbled in his weekly intelligence digest, the “Arabian Report.” The “*dramatis personae*” of the intelligence world acted “in a piece in which it is impossible to observe the unities.” Thus, for instance, “Sir R. Wingate, Sirdar, nominally lives isolated in Khartoum, now in charge of whole of the military and part of the political conduct of affairs in Hejaz. Corresponds with FO [Foreign Office] through McMahon but does not see him.” He mused that “the relations of London, Simla, Basra, and Cairo are perhaps clearer to these . . . desert folk than to British officers themselves” and that the “evils” of Arab craftiness and fractiousness had begun to feed on “our natural British tendency to team rivalry.” In a word, British intelligence in the Middle East had become “oriental,” inscrutable and mysterious, and had taken Middle Eastern policy with it.<sup>56</sup>

The picture quickly grew more obscure. Late in 1916, captured documents revealed the existence of the Silk Letter Plot to create an “Army of God” that would liberate Islamic countries under infidel rule; the plan was communicated on scraps of silk circulated between the so-called Hindustani Fanatics across the Indian frontier; Pan-Islamic leaders in India, the Hejaz, and Kabul; and German and Turkish collaborators. Other documents exposed the abortive von Stotzingen mission to the Hejaz—apparently forced to retreat by the timely launch of the revolt. Both revelations were harrowing in retrospect for their implication of Arab cooperation just when the thousands of Arabs expected to join the Sherif failed to materialize. In Bray’s analysis, the Silk Letter Plot revealed an anti-British effort “spread over . . . the whole mohammedan world,” to guard against which “we must watch and study . . . Persia, Afghanistan, Turkestan, Java and Arabia as well as within the empire.” The German mission put British agents in an unusual position as orientalists—anxious not over the Sherif’s honesty but about his being hoodwinked, in Lloyd’s words, by *Europeans* who “by means of intrigue . . . seek to poison his mind.” Reconfiguring all Arabs as potential enemy collaborators and spies, these events inspired a new conceptualization of intelligence as a tentacular network, with multiple centers of surveillance, designed as much to watch the German and Turkish enemy as to authenticate Arab loyalty. “The whole question is an Imperial one,” Bray explained, requiring “perpetual interchange of views, intelligence, of affairs, of policy” from India to Egypt to Aden. On a map of the area between the Mediterranean and Burma, he marked the places that Pan-Islamism was taught as the basis for “an Intelligence Service that would cover the whole area.” Bray’s recommendations, which circulated among the highest echelons of government thanks to the express interest of Robert Cecil, argued that merely channeling information toward a single center like Cairo would no longer do; a *network* of centers was required, conforming to its subversive counterpart.

Moreover, this network was designed with a longer term in view; it called for a Consular Service that would collect information and possess “a military as well as a civil side.”<sup>57</sup>

British intelligence also expanded into the political project of *fostering* an Arab unity that remained otherwise inchoate. Cox wrote with satisfaction after a British-sponsored durbar at Kuwait and Ibn Saud’s visit to Basra:

The dream of Arab unity which engaged the imagination of the Liberals of Damascus . . . has been brought nearer fulfilment than dreams are wont to come, but the role of presiding genius has been recast. Instead of the brilliant, unscrupulous Saiyid Talib . . . the Chiefs of Eastern and Western Arabia have united at the instance of the British Government.

In his original description of the Arab Bureau’s functions, Sykes had not included what he now claimed as its very *raison d’être*: “the fostering of arab unity and the arab movement.” If his new intelligence organization was mirroring a mirage, or, worse, a lie, he simply transformed it into the cause of which, now, Arab unity was to be the effect and reflection.<sup>58</sup>

Loosely linked agencies now began to coalesce into an intensely collaborative network that spied not only for, but on Arabs, ensuring they joined only in pro-British unity. The bureau had long taken care to decipher the Sherif’s communications with his sons and the Arab Party to authenticate their bona fides as allies, but from 1917 the object was to acquire information about the Arab allies as a nascent independent military and political force. Hogarth’s task in Allenby’s intelligence organization was to collect all knowledge about the Arab world, “*especially* the Arab armies which are fighting in cooperation with us.” Likewise, Alec Kirkbride’s position as an intelligence officer with the Arab Army at Waheida was considered particularly valuable as a window onto the Arab intelligence staff. Covertiness was key: the British staff nearby at Abu el Lissan, from whom Kirkbride took orders, forbore from visiting Waheida since any indication of “inspection” would be extremely resented. The advisers and agents under Cyril Wilson’s command prodded the Sherif repeatedly to employ more spies—reluctant imperialists egging on reluctant oriental intriguers—eventually extracting special dispensation to take over the task themselves, thus extending their surveillance to the Hejazis they were ostensibly helping to free. At the same time, Wilson’s agency worked closely with the Indian CID and the Arab Bureau to apprehend the organizers of the Silk Letter Plot, ultimately deporting a clutch of suspects to Malta. Spying on ostensibly friendly Arabs was part of the plan “To Keep the Arab Movement Alive,” Sykes explained in a memo urging the creation of “an intelligence organisation capable of keeping

politically in touch with the Arabs” through a “political depot” where “messengers should rendezvous, representatives be entertained, councils held and plans discussed.” Through it, they could organize a “secret service” in Syria, based on the natural spy network that was Arab society. “To Employ the Nomad Bedouin to the Best Advantage,” he suggested creating a mobile system of posts through the tribes which would eventually put them in contact with tribes in Mesopotamia. These ideas were most substantially taken into account in the new Jerusalem branch of the Arab Bureau, whose tasks included registering and tracking Bedouins “who after delivery of their messages, disappear . . . and fade away without notice unless more hold is kept on them than it has been possible hitherto to keep.” It would also function as “a place of reunion, where some hospitality can be extended Arab-wise . . . and the necessary mediation with the British administration can be exercised. . . . *Secondarily*, the Bureau will serve as a centre for Intelligence . . . and *incidentally*, for propaganda.” The bureau’s political brief now took precedence over tactical intelligence, making intelligence about Arabs in the occupied territory, whose nomadism now seemed intrinsically subversive, the ultimate priority. Intelligence would have to be further “orientalized”: the new office would not function as a “European office,” but “like a semi-Arab house run by a staff jointly British and native.” Counterespionage entailed concentration of “natives” in fixed areas and prohibition of movement, while “all roving Arabs were arrested and searched.” The Eastern Mediterranean Special Intelligence Bureau became integral to this effort, cooperating with GSI Palestine partly to extend its counterespionage work east upon the *cessation* of military operations; intelligence was evolving into covert peacetime surveillance for purposes unrelated to proximate military needs. Deedes, who was in the special intelligence bureau, also headed the political section of the new Intelligence Corps under Richard Meinertzhagen (back from East Africa) and the Jerusalem branch of the Arab Bureau. Near the end of the war, the Eastern Mediterranean Special Intelligence Bureau and GSI Palestine merged to eliminate by then obvious redundancies, GSI becoming a “unit in the Imperial chain of other Special Intelligence Bureaus such as South Africa, Melbourne, India and Singapore, while maintaining the centralization and coordination of imperial *policy* with MI5 London.” This reorganization signaled the official absorption of a military intelligence agency and occupation regime into the ultra-secret world of C and MI5; the informal concentration of all intelligence into but a few indispensable hands had fast made “specialized” agencies redundant with each other.<sup>59</sup>

To the east, where General Maude had again banished “defeat” from Force D’s vocabulary, tribal pacification and surveillance had always been intrinsic to intelligence. Outposts at the desert frontier were “the eyes and ears through

which [the political officer] can see and hear . . . beyond his borders." Increasingly, however, political officers watched local Arabs not merely as pawns of the Turks but as threats in and of themselves, partly because the uneven British performance in the campaign had prevented them from winning over Arab loyalty wholesale. When a local agent informed him that Amara was being made a "spy-base," Philby, the local political officer, instituted a new practice requiring all visitors to register at his office and certify they would not leave without permission. Dickson admitted spying was "not a very nice job," but since even submission did not preclude treachery by local sheikhs, "I am in turn watching them." Here, too, nervousness about Arab loyalty derived partly from an increasing dependence on Arabs militarily—besides political officers' bands of irregulars, levies were raised to police roads and occupied villages and towns—which presented them in newly alarming aspect. Surveillance was made easier as the net of the Political Department was widened and made denser in the wake of Maude's advance. The "civil commissioner," as Cox was now styled, headed a Secretariat in Baghdad with departments for revenue, finance, judicial, public works, health, and so on, that communicated directly with political officers administering their territories. General Maude's indifference to the "political" side of the occupation (on the grounds that France had no political officers, even though, Bell pointed out, the French had no occupied territory to administer) compelled Cox and Bell to secure, through private channels, an independent status for their regime, in practice if not in fact. In the agents' hands, a covert colonial state grew up under cover of the actual military occupation. The liberation of Mesopotamia was a sleight-of-hand by which a massive counterespionage regime was configured as a "civil administration"; indeed, counterespionage was made "difficult," according to Beach's staff, "by the policy of reconciliation which we had to adopt towards the inhabitants of territory under British occupation." For them, "a primary necessity from an Intelligence point of view" was to "restrict the movements of civil inhabitants as far as possible" and, ideally, prohibit all movement. "Bureaux" were established all over, and political officers employed to create a system of passes, permits, and control posts. This "vast political Intelligence organization" watched over the population—and also governed it.<sup>60</sup>

The parallel developments in Mesopotamia and western Arabia were no accident. The two campaigns had begun increasingly to impinge on each other, agents facilitating much of their coordination. For instance, Sykes created a chief political officer analogue in Palestine to advise Wingate and the commander of the political situation farther east. Geographically, too, the campaigns encroached on each other. The fall of Jerusalem at the end of 1917 forestalled the German Operation Yilderim against Baghdad; both campaigns

were heading north to an imprecisely delineated region, inspiring thoughts of military cooperation; and Cairo was increasingly interested in Najd as the Sherif consolidated his position in the Hejaz. This rapprochement was aided by a bout of agent criss-crossing between the two campaigns, also intended to control the diplomatic damage caused in 1917 by the Balfour Declaration (which promised Palestine to the Zionists), Russian exposure of the secret Sykes-Picot Accord (in which Sykes, acting as a diplomat, had arranged the postwar division of the Arab lands between the Allies), and Russian withdrawal from the war. By opening up Central Asia to attack and utterly shaking Arab faith in British intentions, these events also intensified the commitment to regionwide surveillance. The danger now seemed not so much of German attack but of German use of small forces and propaganda to set increasingly willing local movements in motion against the British. In the shadow of this insecurity, British agents launched an effort to blanket the region with their presence and prevent any weak spot, geographic or diplomatic, from pulling down the web of British power.<sup>61</sup>

Key agents were literally in a perpetual state of motion. Leachman was in charge at Karbala while also darting back and forth to help pacify occupied areas in the north. After the fall of Khan Baghdadi, he also joined a unit of armored cars in pursuit of the Turks. For the next few months he was in charge of both Karbala and the Dulaim region. On the eve of armistice, he was called to join the advance whilst keeping up his other duties. When Mosul fell, he was appointed military governor, in charge of a staff of assistant political officers including Bullard, who was something of a roving administrative jump starter, dispatched to each newly occupied part of Mesopotamia—Khaniqin, Baghdad, Kifri, Kirkuk—before joining Cox, who served in Tehran from 1918 to 1920. The informality of the administrative and intelligence worlds encouraged such hovering between posts. Lawrence having chosen him as an “understudy,” Young left Mesopotamia for Cairo, but as Lawrence showed no sign of giving out, he began to roam the field of operations in search of a job, ultimately assisting in the organization of the nascent departments of Faisal’s short-lived government in Damascus while technically attached to the Desert Mounted Corps. Meanwhile, Bray, thoroughly fed up with the Hejaz, left for France, only to be shunted back to replace Leachman at Karbala. Through Deedes, Kirkbride wound up in the employ of the Eastern Mediterranean Special Intelligence Bureau, although for all *public* purposes, he remained associated with his department at General Headquarters, liberally sharing information he gathered as a special intelligence bureau agent. The original Arab Bureau assumed a spatially attenuated existence; its staff was reinstalled in various new agencies but continued to maintain contact with the Cairo office. It resumed control of

military operations in October 1918 when the Hejaz Operations Staff was disbanded. Arnold Wilson's abolishment of the Basra branch changed little in practice; that branch was never more than Bell (informally), who continued to pour out volumes for Cairo when the administration moved to Baghdad, while the stream of visitors showed no sign of abating. Agents' connections to any particular organization were often tenuous to the point of nullity; they remained ever freelancers, albeit responsible to a clear set of authorities, whose authority derived not from their institutional placement but from their own freelance claim to it.<sup>62</sup>

The shifting patchwork of wartime organization was essentially a single staff made up of the old, prewar community of agents circulating through a bewildering redundancy of agencies. It is difficult to overstate the importance of personal relationships to the form of this organization. Personal contacts buoyed Sykes, Hogarth, and Bell to ever loftier positions, ensuring their ability to shape and direct policy well beyond the scope of the usual intelligence worker. Outright nepotism was rank. There was Kitchener's nephew Parker, the Dawnay brothers, the Kirkbride brothers (Alec's brother took over his intelligence post at Beersheba when he joined the Eastern Mediterranean Special Intelligence Bureau), and even the Philby brothers (Tom Philby was with Basra Marine Transport, another sent a friend in the Royal Flying Corps to fly St. John around Amara, a third with the Royal Indian Marine visited). Lawrence would have gotten his brother into the Arab Bureau but for the war's end. Philip Graves's initial usefulness to Hogarth rested as much on his expertise as on his prewar friendship with Storrs and his relationship to Robert Graves. Wingate's son, Ronald, was a political officer in Mesopotamia. These intimacies underwrote the sharing of adventures, methodological approach, and assumptions about the elision between the military and the political in the Middle East.

As the agents prepared for the transition to peacetime occupation, Sykes, with Cecil's help, moved to the Foreign Office as "Acting Adviser on Arabian and Palestine Affairs." Although he would soon become a casualty of the Spanish flu, he and his colleagues had already laid the foundation for a covert empire in the Middle East in which officials technically affiliated with intelligence institutions would wield an almost unchecked executive power. Prewar coyness about the presence of British agents in Arabia launched the ship of official secrecy about the entire British endeavor in the region. But before unfolding that story, we need to know more about their presumption of authority and flaunting of their expertise, as well as their taste for the covert style. While the conditions of prewar intelligence-gathering shed light on this ethos, it is to the agents' cultural world that we must turn for fuller illumination.

## 2

# The Cultural World of the Edwardian Agent

The intelligence community working on the Middle East was peculiar not only for its informal organization and vexed relationship to Whitehall, but also for the motivations and provenance of its members. As Edwardians disillusioned by the direction of turn-of-the-century life, this group of men—and one woman—were drawn to the region as much for personal as for patriotic reasons; they offered their services partly as cover for their dearer hope of finding spiritual and artistic inspiration in the cradle of civilization. The Arabian blank spot on Edwardian maps was to them as much a “screen on which European fantasies may be projected” as a stage on which they could actually attempt to enact the fantasies repressed by bourgeois Britain. When the war came, it seemed to them to fulfill all their artistic and spiritual cravings with real, world-historical action. As cultural actors, these agents shared the sensibility of contemporaries fascinated by primitivism, the occult, and a minimalist aesthetic; the British intelligence effort in the Middle East was part of the mainstream early-twentieth-century effort to come to terms with modernity and produced for those at home a utopian Arabian counterpoint to all that disturbed them about the direction of British culture and society. In short, the intelligence project in Arabia was shaped as much by Edwardian cultural concerns as by geopolitical ones. The agents’ personal preoccupations, of which they left a rich record, were not merely incidental but attest to their profoundly anti-empirical disposition while on their missions. As their imaginations ran amuck in the Arabia of their

dreams, empiricism had hardly an opportunity in which to flex its atrophying muscle.<sup>1</sup>

### Intelligence in the Name of Literature

The geopolitical circumstances that inspired official interest in intelligence about the Middle East also inspired a more popular interest in recording imperishable images of Arabia at a time in which it appeared to be undeniably and very quickly *changing*, threatening, as one journalist put it, to “make this ‘unchanging East’ but the memory of a dream.” As railways began to roll back “the domination of caprice and temporal decay,” countless books, newspapers, and lecturers strove to capture “this lost land of dead Empires, while yet its sleep remained unharmed.” Indeed, the controversy surrounding the Baghdad Railway itself kept the region in the papers, while the opening of another “sacred railway” from Damascus to the holy cities occasioned the printing of the first European photographs of Medina in the *Illustrated London News* in 1908. That year’s Young Turk revolution and its aftermath kept the Middle East in the headlines for the remainder of the period. Comment on Sir William Willcocks’s high-profile plans to reconstruct the Mesopotamian irrigation system milked to fullest advantage the object lesson embodied in British reclamation of the putative site of the Garden of Eden from devastation at the hands of the feckless Turks. The infant cinema industry, projecting itself as a magical medium best suited to capturing the fantastic, depicted Arabs from the very outset, drawing on the rich supply of universally familiar tales in the *Arabian Nights*. Tourism and religious revivals dating from the previous century produced an enduring fascination with the Holy Land as a “living museum” of the Bible. In short, as one commentator noted on the 1908 release of a new edition of Charles Doughty’s classic travelogue, *Arabia Deserta* (1888), “A new breath moves over the face of Asia, a new curiosity has awakened in Europe.” This curiosity was only intensified by Arabia’s relatively greater inaccessibility compared to the days in which Doughty and his famous forbears such as Alexander Kinglake had traveled.<sup>2</sup>

Intelligence agents were part of this cultural industry. Almost all of them eventually produced books based on their experiences, writing with a particular audience in mind, one that relished tales of mystery and adventure in the Orient. The construction of the explorer as author is especially important in this case, for unlike their forerunners elsewhere, many of these agents traveled to Arabia either with the intention of fulfilling their dream to become writers “first and foremost” or with the preconceived notion that travel in Arabia was

primarily of literary interest. Gathering information was incorporated into their hope of finding in Arabia a means of launching their literary careers. “I am gathering a store of Arab News and notions, which some day will help me in giving vividness to what I write,” wrote the young archaeologist T. E. Lawrence. Most prolific and famous in the community were David Hogarth, G. Wyman Bury, Aubrey Herbert (under the pseudonym “Ben Kendim”—Turkish for “I, myself”—to accommodate embassy rules against disclosures by active diplomats), Leonard Woolley, Mark Sykes, and Gertrude Bell, who used her highly popular works to finance her travel. The inspiration of these literary ambitions lay in the Edwardian view of Arabia as an essentially fictional place, a trope the agents’ works did much to reinforce, as will become clearer below.<sup>3</sup>

As authors and heroes of their accounts, these agents maintained an increasingly high profile in Edwardian society. Their mixing with the world of writers, artists, and other cultural figures was predicated on their status as independently respected and popular men and women. Their exploits were hyped in their widely read, much-publicized books as well as in newspapers—indeed, many of their adventures, such as Valentine Chirol’s, Angus Hamilton’s, and David Fraser’s, were sponsored by papers like the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Times of India*. Sykes’s *Dar-ul-Islam* received rave reviews in 1904 and established him as a writer of importance, and *The Caliph’s Last Heritage* (1915), a tome that combined a rare attempt at a general history of the Ottoman Empire with his unedited tour diaries, was an acknowledged publishing sensation. James Elroy Flecker, the poet, playwright, and consul, single-handedly made small villages near Beirut famous with his poems. Accounts of travel in Arabia, by both anonymous tourists and famous explorers, filled the pages of publications like *Blackwood’s Magazine*. The pages of the newly founded *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS), to which many agents contributed, were so full of books on various Arabic matters that one anonymous reviewer (none other than Hogarth) remarked, “Asiatic Turkey seems to occasion more entertaining books of travel than any other land.” That the genre was reaching the point of super-saturation is evident from frequent prefatory apologies for “having added yet another gallon” to that “ocean of literature.” Explorers also profited from their access to other prominent public platforms, including offices of government; universities; organizations such as the Royal Anthropological Institute, the Royal Geographical Society, and the Central Asian Society; and museums such as the Ashmolean (Captain Shakespear’s Arabia specimens remain on display at the Natural History Museum). As they painstakingly disinterred the great cities of antiquity, Woolley and Hogarth became celebrated and eminent figures, both among and beyond their own circle of academics. Bell was an illustrious guest when she called at Carchemish in 1911, and the story of her prewar trip to Hail

remained a favored topic for school essays in England until the 1930s. Sykes was fêted at home in Sledmere, where he received numerous invitations to speak about his travels at neighboring villages and towns. In 1904–1905, Sledmere’s schoolmaster prepared slides to accompany the show, and in Sykes’s parliamentary campaign of 1908, his lectures took him well beyond the Yorkshire lecture circuit. There were also singular sensations, such as that caused by Lawrence and Woolley in 1913 when they made a mutual exhibit of Britain and two Arabs from the site, Hamoudi and Dahoum, taking them to a show at Earl’s Court and commissioning Francis Dodd to sketch Dahoum.<sup>4</sup>

This commission was not an exceptional transgression by the community of agents into the mainstream of Edwardian artists, intellectuals, and writers. They were intimately connected with that world, both socially and professionally. Aubrey Herbert, an agent, member of Parliament, and poet (his *Eastern Songs* appeared in 1911), counted among his intimates the spy novelist John Buchan, the poet Rupert Brooke, the politicians Maurice Baring and Raymond Asquith, and the social commentator Hilaire Belloc, who had coached him at Oxford. James Elroy Flecker regularly sent his work—much of it Middle Eastern in theme and locale—to magazines and publishers and to the likes of G. K. Chesterton and George Bernard Shaw, who gave him critical feedback. He, too, was close with Rupert Brooke. Sykes actively cultivated relationships with literary figures. After a brief spell at *Granta* and his own satire journal, *Snarl*, the Middle East route to literary fame proved felicitous. Fawning letters of appreciation of *Dar-ul-Islam* arrived from H. G. Wells, who referred to it extensively in his massively popular *Outline of History* (1919), and from Rudyard Kipling, who praised its authentic depiction of all the sights, smells, and confusion of Turkey, offering the notably narcissistic compliment, “You ought to have been born in the East.” Sykes was also friends with Belloc and George Wyndham, the politician and man of letters under whom he briefly served at the Irish Office. Shakespear’s cousin was Olivia Shakespear, herself of Indian Army background, a novelist and longtime intimate of W. B. Yeats, with whom she had an affair and shared an interest in occultism. Her daughter, the artist Dorothy Shakespear, married Ezra Pound, and their son, Omar, is a poet who has translated much Arabic and Persian poetry and traveled extensively in the Middle East. Richard Meinertzhagen, the prewar agent who would become Allenby’s intelligence chief during the war, grew up in intellectual society through his mother’s family, the Potters. Beatrice Webb was his aunt, but Herbert Spencer, Sir Francis Galton, Aldous Huxley, George Eliot, Bernard Shaw, and Oscar Wilde (of whom he severely disapproved), among others, were also family friends. Clement Atlee was a playmate, Winston Churchill a schoolmate, Joseph Chamberlain his aunt’s unsuccessful suitor, and Charles

Darwin a revered acquaintance. It was at Huxley's daughter's instigation, and with Spencer's encouragement, that he launched into and remained devoted to writing his notorious diaries.<sup>5</sup>

Gertrude Bell, as usual, outdid everyone, even in her social reach, partly thanks to her father's position as a country gentleman, industrialist, and Liberal politician. Hence, for instance, her flattering dedication of *Amurath to Amurath* (1911) to Lord Cromer. Distantly related to Bertrand Russell—his uncle was married to her aunt—she was also friendly with Lady Ottoline Morrell, Russell's well-known correspondent and mistress. Bell's sisters were definitely known to Virginia Stephen, whose brother was apparently smitten by these “most brilliant girl conversationalists in London” and whose social and family relations overlapped considerably with that of imperial administrators, even before her marriage to Leonard Woolf, then an administrator in Ceylon. (This was, notably, the era of the famous “orientalist” practical jokes perpetrated by the Stephen siblings: the 1905 “Zanzibar Hoax” and the 1910 “Dreadnought Hoax”). Bell was also close with later affiliates of the Bloomsbury clique: Vita Sackville-West and her diplomat husband, Harold Nicolson, who was one of Bell's relations, were two of the very few people she dined with in Constantinople upon her return from Hail in 1914; Sackville-West would write the foreword to Elizabeth Burgoyne's 1958 biography of the explorer. Bell's brother-in-law was George Trevelyan, who along with another relative, Cecil Spring-Rice of the Foreign Office, was among her summer guests in 1905. In 1913, Trevelyan traveled to Greece with the Indian Army intelligence officer Hubert Young (then on his way to Arabia) and Young's cousin, an editor of the *Morning Post*.<sup>6</sup>

Hogarth's friends among an older generation of Arabia explorers, the Blunts, were pivotal figures in this web of relations between “Arabists” and the rest, particularly since Sir Wilfrid was both a famous, if declining, poet in his own right and a fashionably vocal critic of the government and Lady Anne was Lord Byron's granddaughter. Sir Wilfrid was close with Belloc and a slew of emerging modernist poets, including Pound and Yeats, whose friendship he actively cultivated as early as 1902, and whose appreciation for Blunt's vehement opposition to British rule in Ireland was expressed in “The Peacock” (1916). Yeats and Blunt initially met at the home of Lady Gregory, Yeats's closest collaborator, Blunt's mistress of many years, and a writer and Irish nationalist whose eyes were first opened to the powers of cultural nationalism in Cairo during the revolt of Urabi Pasha in 1882. Bernard Shaw was also a friend of Wilfrid Blunt and consulted him on his work. The Blunts also socialized with Lord Alfred Douglas, Arthur Balfour, G. K. Chesterton, and Churchill, whose particular fascination with the world of cloak-and-dagger had been sharpened by his experiences on the North West Frontier. In short, if the late-nineteenth-century

cult of Arabia was, in Kathryn Tidrick's words, "esoteric and exclusive," by the Edwardian era, it had become part of the mainstream.<sup>7</sup>

In this social world, and with their publications, the agents propagated a view of Arabia as a space for "illicit adventure"; their accounts are marked by a curious slippage between reportage and storytelling. If, as scholars say, the shared cultural environment of spy agencies, writers, and readers produced the artifice of apparent realism at the heart of the attraction of Edwardian spy fiction, the "true fiction" of Arabia explorers, set in a fictionalized Arabian spy-space, played on the same conceit.<sup>8</sup> Many of these works—such as G. Wyman Bury's *The Land of Uz* (1911), Mark Sykes's *Dar-ul-Islam*, Arthur Wavell's *A Modern Pilgrim in Mecca* (1913), and David Fraser's *The Short Cut to India* (1909)—were cast in the mold of traditional imperial adventure novels, recalling especially those familiar "tales of the North-West Frontier." Fraser's book, for instance, while full of technical detail about the route, was capped off by an account of his adventure at the hands of a Shammar robber, for which reviewers reserved their highest praise: "Even those who are not interested in the political and commercial questions will find it an engrossing narrative of adventure." A tourist's account of her travels in Arabia was *criticized* for attempting to pass on too many facts: "We do not want any of that sort of thing . . . no information, indeed, whatever, but just the enthralling story of their daily contact with the incongruous Eastern society in which . . . they were adventuring themselves." Now, the anonymous reviewer in both these instances was Hogarth; writing in the *TLS* and other journals, agents were doubly influential in shaping British ideas about Arabia. Their books' frequent disavowal of scientific pretensions reinforced their status as accounts of adventure, as did their use of such literary devices as scenic dialogue. In general, the more serious and less imitative of fiction the account, the more polite the public reaction. By the anonymous hand of the celebrated geographer Halford John Mackinder, the *TLS* affirmed that Arabia was a land best known imprecisely: noting the discrepancies between the text and maps of Hogarth's *The Penetration of Arabia* (1904), a book assessing *scientific* exploration of the region, it observed indulgently that Arabia was "a land which as a whole is so vaguely known that it is better fitted for the half light of literary description than for the hard and inevitably definite expressions of cartography."<sup>9</sup>

Adventure was not, however, the summit of the agents' literary ambition. They were even more intensely invested in the Romantic view of Arabia as an essentially artistic space, a catalytic space where the poet could abandon himself to reverie. This Romantic egoism may have been somewhat offset by Doughty's vision of the desert as "the place where man regained a proper sense of his own weakness and unworthiness" and other late-nineteenth-century

efforts to reconstruct Arabs as basically earthy and earthly, but Edwardians craving a fusion of art and life continued to see Arabia with what Hogarth's sister called "a poet's imagination." They took up Doughty's struggle to use Arabia as a site for undoing "the decadence of the English language"; the Romantics had found inspiration in the desert, but not linguistic redemption of this sort.<sup>10</sup> The desert's minimalism was key; to Edwardians, it was an atypical heart of darkness, a "void" they knew to be a palimpsest of ancient civilizations, whatever its superficial blankness. The desert horizon had "nothing to show and nothing to tell you," wrote a tourist, "and yet [its] very emptiness is so full of secret possibilities and hidden wonder." "However flat and colourless" the landscape, remarked Edmund Candler as the London *Times*' war correspondent in Mesopotamia, there was "always food for imagination in the air." Bedouin knowledge of this, British commentators reasoned, was the root of their undyingly poetic nature. Their fanciful place-names invested empty spaces with meaning and provided their poets with what Bell called the great "changeless theme of the evanescence of desert existence." Aspiring agents hoped they too might arrive at a transcendental understanding of existence by tapping into creativity kindled by contemplation of the desert. This thinking was in keeping with the modernist fascination with the primitive and the contemporary anthropological belief in "savage survivals," which associated poetry with the mythology of primitive people. Edwardian agents hoped to attain the fusion of art and life they so desired by using a sojourn in the desert to exhume the vestigial primitive in themselves.<sup>11</sup>

Sykes's frequent litanies against the banalities of modern, bourgeois civilization provide perhaps the best example of the Edwardian view that Bedouin life was both more advanced (in a sense) and creatively inspiring because of its barrenness. In an acerbic footnote to his assertion that Arabs, as rhetoricians and poets, have no place in a "civilised community," he defined the latter as, "a community living in towns and in houses, suffering from infectious and contagious diseases, travelling in railway trains, able to read and write, possessing drinking shops, reading newspapers, surrounded by a hundred unnecessary luxuries, possessing rich and poor, slums and palaces, and convinced that their state is the most edifying in the world." Alternating the alleged virtues with the emerging vices of modern European life, he damned the whole system as lacking the genuinely civilized, albeit primitive, sensibility of the Arabs, which was the key to art. In Arabia, the authentic poetic sensibility could thrive. Poets, heroes, laments, dirges, councils of war, women's shrill cries—the stuff of noble desert warfare: "These things are the very salt of a life which knows nothing of old age pensions, Nonconformist consciences, suffragettes, maffickings, professional politicians, trusts, excursions, halfpenny papers, hysteria, and

appendicitis.” He encouraged the imperial hero, artist, writer, and veteran spy Robert Baden-Powell to adapt Bedouin poetic culture to Boy Scouting to provide precisely the spirit of vitality Britain needed to instill in its youth. Lawrence shared this obsession with the desert’s superior aesthetic qualities. “I feel very little lack of English scenery,” he wrote to his brother. “Here one learns an economy of beauty which is wonderful. England is fat—obese.” He agreed absolutely with Doughty’s claim that he who has once been to the desert “is never the same.” “My books would be better,” he affirmed, “if I had been for a time in open country: and the Arab life is the only one that still holds the early poetry,” since it, unlike the Sahara, was “Semitic” in its atmosphere and past. His first foray into writing was a piece for the Jesus College magazine titled “The Gospel of Bareness in Materials,” in which he celebrated austerity as an aesthetic principle.<sup>12</sup>

Arabia was thus not merely an aesthetic space, but *the quintessential* space for twentieth-century art, a physical manifestation of the emerging aesthetic of the day. Lawrence and Sykes, despite their own fairly conservative literary tastes, were in tune with emerging trends of European culture. *Arabia Deserta* was ubiquitous on the shelves of Edwardian agents, but also on those of many modernists, such as William Morris, Henry Green, W. H. Auden, Yeats, Wyndham Lewis, D. H. Lawrence, and Aldous Huxley. T. S. Eliot ranked it along with the novels of Henry James and Joseph Conrad as indicative of future directions of English prose. In it, the desolate landscape emerged for the first time as a metaphor for man’s inner state and a transcendent space that could induce mythic consciousness, a shift that, according to Richard Bevis, signifies Doughty’s break with the Victorians and anticipation of the modernists, for whom the void was a central literary concern. Without Doughty’s invocation of the Desert Sublime, argues Bevis, *The Waste Land* remains inexplicable; moreover, where else but the desert would a minimalist want to live?<sup>13</sup>

James Joyce completed *Ulysses* in 1918, and although Stephen Daedalus never quite leaves Dublin, it is worth recalling that there was a wider context of travel literature framing this fascination with Doughty’s work and that of self-styled “Near East Kiplings” such as Flecker and Herbert. Novelists were using travel, metaphorically and practically, as a device for exploring psychological states and the writer’s craft, so much that by the Edwardian period, “the modernist poem and the scientific paper were crowding in on territory once a part of travel writing.” Indeed, other writers were also venturing, at least figuratively, in the agents’ direction. Virginia Woolf, who got as far as Constantinople in 1906 and 1911, was experimenting with travel to vast, unfathomable spaces in her first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), which she began in 1908. Though its imaginary Amazonian setting is a long way from Arabia, she had already begun

to signify in this, as in later novels, those characteristically Woolfian moments of surreality with a sudden vision of the “outlines of Constantinople in a mist.” (A Constantinople enshrouded in mist and “opalescent cloud” also appears in a contemporary poem by Vita Sackville-West, who, like the agents, was a writer initially shaped by her experiences in the Middle East.) The novel’s horizonless Amazonian landscape echoes the agents’ Arabia in its lack of place-names, dizzying oceanlike vastness, and mountains resembling a “great encampment of tents.” It dominates the novel’s mood, frequently providing the object of the characters’ drowsy philosophical contemplation. All the excitement of “the voyage out” derives from precisely the same sense of exaltation, vitality, and freedom that marked much of the travel writing on Arabia, expressing which, Woolf deploys the desert metaphor. As Rachel Vinrace’s ship pulled away from England, “a shrinking island in which people were imprisoned,” she became “an inhabitant of the great world, which has so few inhabitants, travelling all day across an empty universe, with veils drawn before her and behind. She was more lonely than the caravan crossing the desert...infinitely more mysterious...in her vigour and purity she might be likened to all beautiful things.” Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914) reaches explicitly for the Middle Eastern metaphor to express the surreality of the world. Similarly, Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim* (1900) sets out on a voyage—to Aden, in that remote, Middle Eastern sphere of the world, “beyond the end of telegraph cables and mail-boat lines,” where “the haggard utilitarian lies of our civilization wither and die, to be replaced by pure exercises of imagination, that have the futility, often the charm, and sometimes the deep hidden truthfulness, of works of art.” This space “off the map” was the ideal space in which the fantastic, melodramatic, and deeply philosophical tale of the disastrous fate of the sailor Jim could unfold. Popular novels experimenting with evocative styles and arcane plotting were also set in the Orient. Witness the applause for a novelist who had abandoned a setting in “the more trivial and vulgar side of London society” in favor of allowing his soul to be “stirred by the desert, its immensity and freedom and solemnity,” thus imparting to this book “more emotion, more vigour, more sense of life” than any of his previous.<sup>14</sup>

Contemporaries remarked the sudden emergence of this new “literary and artistic cult” of the desert. One reviewer asserted: “No sensitive soul before the nineteenth century ever regarded the Sahara as anything but a horrid waste. Now hotels are built in it, ladies camp upon it, tourists meander about it, and the chorus of its praise ascends daily.” He speculated on the cause:

Our civilization has grown so complex that a long dormant instinct of revolt is awake. The individual, chafing under his burden of social

observance, wants to return, for however short a time, to more primitive life and feel his self-sufficiency. The desert, which is the most primitive thing on earth, offers an opportunity; so into it he goes and finds there beauty and health, things which were there always, but used to make no more appeal to him.

Agents were both shaping and diagnosing this aesthetic shift: this commentary in the *TLS* was anonymously authored by Hogarth. The fetishistic interest in the desert suggests that the craving for escapist descriptions of Arabia was more than the old hankering after an exotic and mysterious East. A reviewer of *The Desert and the Sown* (1907) praised Bell for forbearing to describe the famous sights of Damascus: “Unless one realizes that Damascus is the gate of the desert . . . one misses all its significance. The wild desert life, with its uncertainty and vicissitudes, haunts Damascus, and nothing appeals more to the imaginative traveller.” Edwardians had shifted their focus from the exotic-erotic bazaars, mosques, and palaces of Arabia to the desert idyll.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Arabian desert also provided a particularly useful setting in contemporary espionage fiction. Rudyard Kipling addressed the Royal Geographical Society in 1914, an event emblematic of the coeval evolution of the British spy novel and British intelligence in this period. In the area of Middle East intelligence, that mutual influence was perhaps most memorably manifested by Aubrey Herbert’s inspiration of Sandy Arbuthnot, the fictional hero of John Buchan’s *Greenmantle* (1916), written the year before Buchan was appointed wartime director of information and then director of intelligence. The enormously popular novel chronicles Richard Hannay and Sandy Arbuthnot’s journey to Constantinople and, abortively, to Mesopotamia, as they attempt to uncover and crush a giant German-Islamic conspiracy against the empire. But even where Arabia was not the spy novel’s actual setting, its imagery hovered in the background. That Buchan described Constantinople as “pure Arabian nights” on his 1910 visit and then depicted the England of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915) as “a sort of *Arabian Nights*” can be read as an attempt to orientalize that familiar landscape, to render the *heimlich unheimlich* and thus fitting for an espionage tale. An “unenhanced” English landscape would not have sufficed, for the very infrastructure of storytelling had vanished from that settled and thus disenchanting space. An innkeeper in the novel explains why he, unlike his ancestors, could not regale visitors with wondrous tales:

Maybe in the old days when you had pilgrims and ballad-makers and highwaymen and mail-coaches on the road. But not now. Nothing comes here but motor-cars full of fat women, who stop for lunch, and

a fisherman or two in the spring, and the shooting tenants in August. There is not much material to be got out of that. I want to see life, to travel the world, and write things like Kipling and Conrad.

To revive storytelling, the aspiring writer had to travel where itinerant “pilgrims and ballad-makers” might still be found. Buchan named Erskine Childers’s *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903), set on Germany’s northern coast, the best adventure story ever written, largely because its “atmosphere of grey northern skies and . . . wet sands is as masterfully reproduced as in any story of Conrad’s.” It too transformed an ordinary occidental landscape into an exotic wasteland of infinite oriental mysteriousness. Indeed, Childers, who would serve in wartime intelligence on the coasts of Syria, Sinai, and Asia Minor, explicitly evokes the spy-space of Arabia: the adventure in the surreal northern German landscape unfolds on “a desert of sand,” and Davies, one of the agents, is a “street arab.” Basil Liddell Hart, the military theorist, later noted that “the title of that famous story of spying on the German coastline . . . might have been coined still more aptly to fit” Lawrence’s activities in Sinai on the eve of the war. While some thought it typically incompetent of the authorities to assign Childers, an expert on the North Sea, to intelligence on the eastern Mediterranean, perhaps his North Sea was something of a proxy for Arabia all along. Other classic spy fiction, such as G. K. Chesterton’s *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908) and Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* (1907), also took place in deceptive and murky surroundings obliquely referring to the Middle East. In the popular imagination, even espionage transpiring far from the East tended, by its very nature, to “orientalize” all settings, to render them obscure and inscrutable.<sup>16</sup>

The spy novel was a genre rooted in imperial insecurity, and Arabia was, as we have seen, the focus of many imperial anxieties in this period. In general, Edwardian writers drew on the desert motif to express not only anxiety about the direction of British culture and society but also their concern about the seemingly aimless trajectory of the empire, which threatened, like all modern, capitalistic, only outwardly solid creations, to simply “melt into air” and squander its potential to achieve the majestic immortality and imperishable meaningfulness of its ancient predecessors, whose glories were then being rediscovered in the Middle East, often by the agents. “Ah, if there shall ever arise a nation whose people have forgotten poetry or whose poets have forgotten the people, though they send their ships round Taprobane and their armies across the hills of Hindustan, though their city be greater than Babylon of old, though they mine a league into earth or mount to the stars on wings,” warned Flecker, “they will be a dark patch upon the world.” The very surroundings of the ancient empires bespoke a broader civilizational indestructibility. Vita

Sackville-West's "Nomads" described in enchanted tones Bedouin wandering, "frontiers falling as we went," over all Asia and all time: "the old forgotten empires, which have faded turn by turn,/ From the shades emerging slowly to their ancient sway return,/ And to their imperial manhood rise the ashes from the urn." Edwardian writers found in the desert theme a means of expressing the danger to a civilization that had gone adrift from the safe harbors of faith, austerity, grandeur, and elemental liberty into a hedonistic ocean of sophistry, overabundance, mediocrity, and conformity.<sup>17</sup>

The view that "Primitiveness inhered in the Orient, *was* the Orient," was, Edward Said has told us, a touchstone of orientalist thought, but Said is not entirely on the mark in his claim that travelers like Lawrence and Bell saw Arabia as historically and geographically "barren and retarded" and the Arab as possessed of "centuries of experience and no wisdom." The racist perception of Arab primitivism was not an entirely negative depiction *to the Edwardian mind*, nor was it mere romanticization of their noble savagery. It was also, during the weary Edwardian era, envious, however speciously in our view. Edwardians did not see Arabs as entirely lacking in wisdom, but as possessed of a different, more seductive, intuitive rather than intellectual wisdom. They wanted to know, as the journalist Meredith Townsend put it, "What gives the Arab alone, even among Asiatics, that perfection of mental content," for "suppose... that Mecca survives Manchester, that when Europe is a continent of ruins, the Arab shall still dwell in the desert... living on like the Pyramid." Adepts at "rhetoric, subtle argument, poetry and histrionism," in Sykes's only partly patronizing words, Arabs were alleged to have greater insight into matters abstract. This was a period in which primitivism was *trendy*, however racist.<sup>18</sup>

### Intelligence in the Name of Escape

Early-twentieth-century works by Conrad, Kipling, Woolf, Buchan, and others were invested in forestalling the "disenchantment of the world" unleashed by Western expansion and together constituted a distinct turn-of-the-century genre that John McClure calls "late imperial romance." Seeking to once again open up unmapped spaces, Buchan and Kipling suggested that imperialism in its very triumph produced such a space—in the deterritorialized zone of espionage, a world in which mystery is rediscovered and the disillusioned hero dramatically and redemptively lost from the realm of politics to the realm of spirit. The fascination with Arabia as an artistic and even culturally redemptive space was rooted in its special significance as just such an unmapped, unexplored space, one that also happened to have emerged as *the* zone of Edwardian espionage. The very

consciousness of ignorance that inspired new intelligence initiatives in the region at this juncture at once clouded those initiatives with an aura of romance especially compelling to Edwardians. “As the visible world is measured, mapped, tested, weighed,” wrote the anthropologist and occultist Andrew Lang, “we seem to hope more and more that a world of invisible romance may not be far from us.” A sense of “belatedness” marked European exploration in this period, a sense that all the dark places of the earth had already been explored and conquered, producing in Britain what one scholar describes as an obsessive search for “an ‘elsewhere’ still unexplored.” The exploration “theme” became ubiquitous, pervading children’s books as a form of play and attracting followers through Baden-Powell’s Scouting movement. The agents were among those bored of the jungle, shikars, and, most of all, old India hands, as Walter Stirling, an Egyptian Army officer who served in intelligence and as chief staff officer to Lawrence during the Arab Revolt, would later recall; they yearned for new experience. In this expectant atmosphere, the political situation in Arabia also began to draw the British public’s eye repeatedly toward it: the *Times* noted that, while little was known about Arabia, “stories reach the bazaars of Bombay and Cairo of strange fights between mail-clad warriors, of armies still contending with bows and arrows, of moonlight battles, of siege and sortie, and attack and surprise.” To temper the disheartening announcement of the end of the age of romantic exploration, the Royal Geographical Society instituted a special series called “The Still Unknown,” focusing on places that continued to offer scope for the pioneer explorer, beginning first with Hogarth’s lecture on Arabia. The *Times* frequently hailed the relief Arabia offered to those fearing that “the old type of adventure into the absolutely unknown” could now transpire only on the South Pole; the *TLS* called Arabia “the one country whose secrets still elude [archaeologists].” Arabia offered a reassuring continuation of the glories of nineteenth-century imperial exploration at a time when projecting imperial glory had become especially crucial to British prestige (witness the spate of ceremonial durbars, tours, and other such spectacular pageantry). The fact that much of the region was blank by virtue of being forbidden, both by local and British authorities, enhanced its appeal, allowing journeys in it to morph into “quests” of a higher order. The Suez Canal and railways having brought the region closer, its inviolateness became even more agitating. Hogarth pointed to the irony that Mecca’s “very pretension to secrecy” tended to “excite in many Europeans so strong a curiosity of the forbidden as to impel them to Arabia.” Indeed, Arthur Wavell excused his 1909 trespasses into Mecca on these very grounds. So critical was Arabia’s enduring inaccessibility to its attraction that some despaired at its imminent incorporation, via the Hejaz railway, into the realm of the accessible world.<sup>19</sup>

An intelligence assignment in Arabia was thus framed within the *fictionalized*, because consciously anachronistic, terms of the old imperial adventurism, rather than within the terms of, say, a contemporary intelligence mission to Germany; hence in part the fictional aspirations of the agents' works. Agents projected onto the practical task entrusted to them their personal fantasies of repeating the legendary coups of Richard Burton and David Livingstone. Meinertzhagen grew up infatuated with such figures, not least because of his awesome boyhood encounters with Blunt; Henry Stanley; Cecil Rhodes, who invited him to Africa (his father forbade him to go); and Sir Harry Johnston, who introduced him to Burton and thrilled him with descriptions of Africa (and perhaps even more inspiringly, tales of his bureaucratic insubordination). Hogarth may have thought that "to repeat Burton's exploit in these days would be to effect a mere *coup de théâtre*," but that was precisely what many agents wanted to effect. Wavell, for instance, determined to enter Mecca in disguise, knowing his intrusion would not result in any information gains. On his death, Soane's journey was also compared to Burton's and Doughty's. Renewal of the Victorian script of imperial adventure in forbidden Arabia produced that increasingly rare imperial perquisite, fame. Bell was thrilled to discover in Mesopotamia: "I am a Person in this country.... Renown is not difficult to acquire here." Hubert Young later reminisced about his youthful daydreams about "the fame that would one day be his for his journeys in the trackless wastes of Central Arabia." Somewhat perversely, but crucially for the evolution of intelligence practices, these individuals became agents not to become anonymous ciphers but to garner a more traditional imperial fame. In this, their mind-set was notably different from the humble "public service mentality" of, say, contemporary explorers of Australia's deserts.<sup>20</sup>

Agents were also attracted to the region by another kind of nostalgia: a longing for Britain's preindustrial past. Certainly, the Romantics too had sought redemption from industrial life in the East, particularly India, but Edwardians did not so much urge Europe to copy Arabia as seek escape *from* Europe into Arabia and combined fulfillment of this wish with intelligence work. In Najd, "the gateway of an unknown land," wrote the Aden agent, G. Wyman Bury, "one may step straight from this modern age of bustle and chicanery into an era of elemental conditions... back into the pages of history to mediaeval times." Likewise, Lawrence first stepped into the Middle East to research his Oxford thesis, "The Influence of the Crusades on European Military Architecture to the End of the Twelfth Century," which his brother later described as "a dream way of escape from Bourgeois England." In Arabia, jaded Edwardians found a living stage set, where the deceit of modern life was replaced by the glittering mirage of medievalism and literature, a more alluring

deceit, perhaps less oppressive, but in any case not conducive to a measured, empirical approach to intelligence-gathering.<sup>21</sup>

Unlike their Victorian predecessors, these agents hoped not only to escape the ugliness of industrial society, but also the decadence and discord of a society of warring classes. The enduring tribal order of the cradle of civilization seemed to offer a glimpse of their own, increasingly mythical, organic medieval past. The frustrated upper-class affinities many of them shared—Sykes was an aristocrat disturbed by the seemingly inexorable decline of his class; the bastard-child Lawrence felt cheated of his aristocratic patrimony—informed their sense of alienation from England and attraction to Arabia, their marginality at once serving as a badge of authentically eccentric Englishness. Bell followed in a line of aristocratic women travelers in the desert, explicitly bucking bourgeois Victorian gender stereotypes.<sup>22</sup> Together, they romanticized Arabia as an oasis of nobility in an otherwise debauched world, whatever its faults as an admittedly oriental society. It was on a space-time continuum outside the reach of a real world laboring under the unenviable burdens of history, modernity, and “progress.” The disasters of the South African War brought a new intensity to the mourning for Britain’s lost valor. Serving on the front, Sykes pined, “O for the East, the East and real feelings. *Allah! Ho Akbar, Din we el Mohamed!* There fighting is real fighting.” In the twentieth century, the fascination of Arabia was less a desire for the exotic than, to borrow Peter Brent’s phrase, “nostalgia for the standards of Sir Lancelot.” The region’s agitated political state, manifested in a series of tribal clashes, seemed to confirm the myth that it was the last refuge of a chivalric order, its very proximity stirring the European’s hankering after a way of life lost to him. Agents went to Arabia in search of escape from the harsh reality of life, into a *utopia*, a no-place; witnessing or taking notes on the reality of life in Arabia was not uppermost in their minds.<sup>23</sup>

In this utopia of aristocrats, agents hoped to rediscover a personal sovereignty crushed by the oppressive conventions of bourgeois society. Arabs seemed “a free people . . . on the very edges of a Europe more and more bound in the chains of industrialism, prudishness and economic necessity.” The desert was, to Sykes, a haven for individuals who prized “boundless liberty” above all else, whether they had been born there or had fled civilization’s relentless smothering of their instincts to be there. Extending their romanticization of the noble Arab to *themselves*, Edwardian agents hoped in Arabia to resurrect their authentic selves and allow their intrinsic nobility as free-born Englishmen of legend to surface uninhibited by bourgeois convention. Soane’s “unorthodox ways” shocked his deskbound chiefs at the Imperial Bank of Persia when he embarked on his journeys. The DMO agent Douglas Carruthers compared his “escape from the bonds of civilization” to “running away from school!” “From

now on we were ourselves,” he rejoiced. “We acknowledged no master, we obeyed no rules.... We paid no taxes... we answered no letters; civilization could go bang for aught we cared.” Instead, “A new responsibility developed upon us—that of self-discipline in its most exacting form.”<sup>24</sup>

Ostensibly stripped of artifice in the desert, the agents worked their surreptitious, undercover behavior into an imaginative vision of their primordial identity. Arabia became the space to which traveler-agents came to be *free* from their governments, to be, as Bell called herself, an *outlaw*, especially given that their missions were often undertaken in defiance of official orders. Besides being the quintessential space for unfettered movement, it was also sovereign, beyond “the longest arm of the law” (particularly for Europeans protected by the Capitulations). To many, it recalled the sea, that traditional space of English liberty. The fact that it was Ottoman territory, without, evidently, being under effective Ottoman control, made it a sort of “no man’s land.” A Hobbesian state of nature beyond any legal, societal, or bureaucratic gaze, it was invisible, a space into which the agents too could vanish, disappear. There, “silence and solitude fall round you like an impenetrable veil.” Collecting intelligence—serving and representing a government by being its *eyes* abroad—was a task requiring subtle characterization in a space whose freedom from servitude, governments, and any sort of surveillance was celebrated. Agents coped with these incongruous obligations by conceiving their work more in mythopoetic than in mundane terms, their dispositions more visionary than pragmatic. They strove to become *part* of this utopia of free nobility, especially while fulfilling the intelligence missions that took them there. Their missions would thus be awash in the glow of the code of honor, loyalty, and duty that was the region’s demiurge, raising their fact-finding missions to epic quests—with some success, evidently: Herbert was unanimously described as a “knight”; Norman Bray titled his biography of fellow agent Leachman, “*A Paladin of Arabia*”; and Lawrence, according to his friend and biographer, the poet Robert Graves, never outgrew playing at knights, actually binding himself to the same codes of conduct. This was partly the source of their social capital at home: Buchan considered his muse, Aubrey Herbert, a “survivor from crusading times,” possessing “the most insane gallantry” he had ever known.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, at home, Arabists drew the romantic aura of Arabia to themselves, constructing themselves as eccentrically mysterious people worthy of entry to the world of artists and writers. Even before his travels, Lawrence’s ascetic eating habits were much remarked, as was his reputation as “a strange undergraduate who never appeared in the daytime but spent hours of the night walking round the quadrangle by himself.” A friend described his austere rooms as “the most silent place I have ever been in,” since Lawrence believed,

“only in silence can the soul hear its own accents, and...only a withdrawal from the world can ensure...integrity of his purpose.” In the Officers’ Training Corps at Oxford, he was known to keep a copy of the *Odyssey* in his pocket at all times. Thus, by 1909, writes one of his biographers, “Lawrence was already creating in the substance of his life and his vivid accounts of it material for legends about his adventures and exploits, activities which were, *in reality*, extraordinary.” His wartime colleague, Wyndham Deedes, would also be lionized for his peculiar love of the desert and its silences and an “asceticism of habit” that enabled him to do without food and rest and to bend his “pain-wracked body” to his will. Likewise, during the war, officers’ hearts leapt at the sight of Aubrey Herbert, whom they knew well from his prewar days scrambling across Oxford “by roofs, gutters, parapets, pipes, window-sills.” In Buchan’s literary representation, Herbert/Arbuthnot “was a man of genius...but he had the defects of such high-strung, fanciful souls. He would take more than mortal risks... Let him find himself in some situation which in his eyes involved his honour, and he might go stark crazy.” However heroic, they were vulnerable in a way that the typical phlegmatic British gentleman was not. (Thus, the evil mastermind behind the German plot at the heart of *Greenmantle* aroused only hatred in the average Briton, but could, by appealing to Arbuthnot’s imagination, find in him “an unwilling response.”) The dramatic value of such individuals lay in their complexity as barely bona fide Englishmen, eccentrics and near-rogues at once bound by a unique, overweening sense of honor putting them beyond the pale of ordinary moral exactitude. They were sovereign, laws unto themselves—ideal heroes of spy novels in which the ethical-moral dimension is fundamental. The agents celebrated their own and their region’s shared peculiarity. A consul avowed, “The geographical zone combined with the somewhat irrational conditions of work produced a marked professional deformation”; in short, all the members of the Levant Service “were slightly mad,” forming “a rather eccentric fraternity.” In donning the mantle of wise eccentricity, the agents and other Edwardian elites looked again to Doughty and, especially, to Blunt, who periodically wandered the south of England with a tent “as though reliving the desert journeys of the past” and kept his “Baghdad robes” handy on social occasions, dressing Churchill in them in 1912 and presenting a similar set (kaftan, waistcoat, and abbeyeh) to Sir Sydney Cockerell, curator of the FitzWilliam Museum at Cambridge. He could be seen in his Bedouin garb most famously at the Peacock Dinner of January 1914, at which Pound, Yeats, Richard Aldington, Frederic Manning, and other poets honored him as the prophet of modernist poetry. “It seems very unlikely this [lunch] was just about Blunt’s poetry,” wagers Helen Carr. “It was more the heady mix that Blunt represented: virile, poetic, anti-establishment, anti-Empire and aristocratic.”<sup>26</sup>

The “desert aura” seemed to distinguish travelers in Arabia from even the most romantic of explorer-authors in other regions. Their special fascination with the desert, a veritable obsession to a proud few, was held to set them apart from the ordinary information-gatherer abroad, investing their missions with deeper purpose. They claimed a congenital “restlessness,” an atavistic wanderlust that drove them to “return” to a nomadic existence that had become impossible in the restrictive, settled, urban life at home. These sensitive souls felt they alone could recognize, in a time of slavish materialism, the austere beauty and vitality of the desert: Bell greeted news of another’s equally eccentric love for it with an ebullient “Welcome and kinship!” Through the war, their taste for the desert was echoed in legends of their peculiar abstemiousness and devotion to learning. They seemed to be after a greater prize than the usual interloper abroad. Whether “pilgrims to its holy places, or archaeologists confessed and disguised, or passing observers of its actual societies,” affirmed Hogarth, explorers in Arabia were a breed apart from the soldiers, adventurers, missionaries, and traders who had “opened out most dark places of the earth,” “impelled to the peninsula by their own curiosity.” The motley crew in Arabia shared a pursuit of knowledge beyond an assortment of facts that could be assimilated via the usual taxonomies; they were after the knowledge that came of the journey itself, especially in the land of “pilgrimage”—a word frequently bandied about in this context. A reviewer paid tribute to Hogarth himself as “a man of the world in the best and broadest sense of the term—the sense in which Herodotus and Kinglake were men of the world,” which was the epic status to which Arabia explorers aspired and which they attained partly by recalling these classical forbears in the very nomenclature of the region they crossed. That they assiduously cultivated this heroic reputation is evident from the occluded perspective of their narratives: H. V. F. Winstone notes that the members of this intimate community “hardly ever referred to their fellow travellers, even in private correspondence, though they stayed in the same hotels and crossed paths in the same barren stretches of country.” Explorers tended to portray their adventures as solitary forays into a land that remained untouched even by their colleagues and unmarked by the overlapping domains of the various agencies involved in intelligence in the region.<sup>27</sup>

The Edwardian agent in Arabia was also distinct from his Victorian prototype in the very important sense of being a self-consciously heroic figure in what he thought of as a world of make-believe and delighting in his awareness of being a hangover from the actual era of exploration. The new type of explorer-agent—such as Bury, Bray, Shakespear—was a nostalgic gentleman of military background, a *government* agent acting out an expired Victorian ideal of freelance exploration. They were avatars of Colonel Creighton in Rudyard Kipling’s

*Kim* (1901), exemplar of the power-is-knowledge trope in Edwardian fiction. A man of action armed with an encyclopedic grasp of his domain, he was, above all, a disciplined English gentleman. Agents in Arabia maintained that “the right spirit for a traveller to enter Arabia” was “as a gentleman of quality” and aspired to play, with consummate skill and honor, a very great game. Other agents—disguise aficionados such as Lawrence, Leachman, Soane, and Major Noel (an agent in Kurdistan)—were more like Kim himself, liminal figures capable of “passing” and with a taste for life on the lam. They, too, fit in with the ethos of the “great game” propagated by Victorian and Edwardian public schools as the critical metaphor for the colonial mission. Indeed, St. John Philby, who would emerge during and after the war as one of the most notorious members of this community of agents, fatefully named his even more notorious son after his literary hero. It was thus no accident that by the twentieth century, Britons no longer saw espionage as incompatible with Englishness and gentlemanliness and that for the first time secret agents emerged as *heroic* protagonists in popular literature: if the twentieth-century English gentleman was, above all, a *performer*, someone driven to conceal in order to impress, a crucial pillar of the official culture of secrecy, the spy in the East, according to Kipling, *as quoted* in a foundational intelligence memorandum of 1909, was the consummate gentleman-hero who concealed all behind an immovable mask of rectitude, played the game discreetly, and died quietly and honorably.<sup>28</sup>

While, aside from the Great Game itself, almost everything in *Kim* relating to the organization of British agents passing as Indian natives was the product of Kipling’s imagination,<sup>29</sup> in the decade after the book’s publication, reality began to imitate it in Arabia, in a critical evolutionary moment in the mutual shaping of the world of real spies and the genre of the spy novel. The 1909 intelligence memorandum treated the novel as a veritable guidebook, accepting its world and even its bureaucracy literally and elaborating its lessons with characters from the *Arabian Nights*; conceptually, Arabia had been incorporated into the world of the Great Game, not least because Arab tribal warfare was considered “really very like playing a game.” Arabia was conceived as a geographical and political extension of the similarly barren and tribal North West Frontier. The entire swathe was thought to be controlled by the same “vast and mysterious agencies...incomprehensible to rational minds”—the arcane political universe at the heart of *Kim*. (Not that the overlap was entirely imagined: while the British Indian government reached into the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, Indian and Arab trade and Shia pilgrimage to Najaf and Karbala ensured close regional ties, as did the social and financial connections fostered by the Oudh Bequest, which since the mid-nineteenth century had channeled millions of rupees to the holy cities through British mediation.)

Elision of the North West Frontier with Arabia compounded to colossal proportions both the domain of inscrutability and the stage on which mythic imperial heroes with a preternatural insight into these “mysterious agencies” had for generations confronted their nemeses and become larger than life.<sup>30</sup>

The real-life agents in Arabia relished the apparently authentic resemblance of their work to the intelligence world of espionage fiction. Many reported, and some reveled in, the atmosphere of intrigue in Arabia, in which, despite the Turks’ precautions, it was *easiest* “to travel secretly, or hatch plots.” It was generally agreed that all travel in Arabia called for a furtive deportment that rendered even tourism casually espionage-like. The leniency of consular officials towards illicit British travelers, described in chapter 1, was partly rooted in the idea that innocent British travelers could not help but comport themselves like spies and intriguers; it was simply the way of the place. Arabia was a stage, a place for “making believe,” and *escaping*, rather than simply recording, reality.<sup>31</sup>

The feeling of fictional enactment set intelligence-gathering in Arabia apart, crucially shaping the agents’ willingness and ability to function as empiricists. The Romantics had recoiled from the real Orient, failing to find in it the escape promised by the Orient of imagination, but Edwardians, recoiling from the grotesque reality of their *own* country, nurtured a need for aesthetic experience so desperate that they did not even see mundane Arabia when they got there, only their prefiguring vision of it. Their ostensible purpose may have been to gather precise intelligence, but, Brent observes, “deep down they pursued no such practicalities; instead they moved through the landscape of an ancient reverie, emissaries of a collectively held illusion, links between a Europe that had become incomprehensible and an Arabia that had never existed.” Sykes reveled in “How pleasant it is to be absolutely ignorant of geology,” for it left one to dream up explanatory theories of the strange landscape, shaped by the chatter of his “philosophic muleteer.” For such agents, however charmless the real Baghdad, “Baghdad is a magic word, as the place itself was magic in the days of long ago.” Whatever its dilapidated state, “memory and imagination, too, are faithful genii easily summoned” and would conjure “from the pages of the Nights the most gorgeous palaces, the most impregnable castles, and the most beautiful gardens . . . like a dream.” Similarly, Bell confided to Hogarth that whatever she actually felt while there, “I *say* I love the Desert.” Travel in Arabia was a matter of fashioning reality from the stuff of fiction—from “the pages of the Nights”—rather than appraising reality by the standard of fiction. Indeed, agents doubled their missions for fact with searches for fictions: Carruthers coupled his intelligence mission with a quest to find the oryx, presumed unicorn of Biblical fame, in “a region as fantastic and wild as himself.”

When he finally encountered his “treasure” “behind the veil,” he rejoiced, “Imagination has become a reality.” He had gone through the wardrobe into an enchanted world.<sup>32</sup>

Playing knights, explorers, or spies seemed appropriate on a desert stage where Arab thespians provided a model of uninhibited and unending performance. “The Bedawi is to a great extent a histrion,” explained Sykes’s companion, Captain Smith, “and much as I like and respect him, I must admit that his ferocity, his chivalry, and his generosity are to a large extent myths—myths that he has created himself, and propagates persistently and well.” If Arabs filled the monotony of desert life with illusions of their grandeur, British travelers battled an otherwise somber existence by joining what they knew for only illusorily grand company. Storytellers, jugglers, poets, and magicians were among the ubiquitous, peripatetic entertainers of the desert they encountered, a web of yarn-spinners that seemed to immerse the entire region in an ocean of stories. Only in the Syrian desert, Sykes said, could the traveler find an old man “dressed in rags, equally prepared to extemporize poetry or travel six days’ journey for 1s.6d. per diem.” The agents’ own journeys, they knew, would become part of this endless storytelling. Bell took heart when a guide told her: “‘In all the years when we come to this place we shall say: “Here we came with her, here she camped.” It will be a thing to talk of, your ghazzu. We shall be asked for news of it and we shall speak of it and tell how you came.’”<sup>33</sup>

Ultimately, information in the desert could only be magically real, secreted in a labyrinth of tales. Desert politics were merely episodes in a land of unending (and, implicitly, pointless) epics. Bell rejoiced upon her return to the desert in 1906 when she heard the latest installments in the Rashid-Saud feud around the campfire: “So the tale ran through the familiar stages of blood feud and camel lifting, the gossip of the desert.” The desert was full of such “long stories . . . without beginning, without end.” This idea acquired the immutability of an axiom. The title of Bell’s travelogue *Amurath to Amurath* is an homage to Shakespeare’s pithy comment on the serially unchanging imperia of the Turkish court. The timelessness of the East is, of course, a familiar orientalist trope, but, carried around in the minds of intelligencers in Arabia, it acquired a special significance. While ostensibly collecting facts, they confronted the rather counterproductive notion that there could be no real “news” in the desert, that all that transpired was part of an endlessly unfolding epic and that the epic repeated itself ad nauseam. One could only enjoy retelling the tales within the tales, so that intelligence in Arabia began itself to resemble a mission akin to Scheherazade’s yarn-spinning nights with Shahriyar.<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, agents generally compared entering Arabia to entering the pages of a great book. Many felt the Bible was “one of the few books that one can read

in this sort of wandering life. . . . Any other book made too great a demand on one's mental powers." It functioned as an eternally relevant guide to the region, placing travelers as much in the mythological past as in the real present. Epic literature like the *Odyssey* was also held to provide insight into Arabia, speaking as it did to what was universal and timeless, and thus to the essence of the desert. Consuls' training in the classics did not merely build character; for those sent to the Middle East, it was seen as practical knowledge. Some, like Bell, traveled by the light of Doughty's archaic new-age bible *Arabia Deserta*, feeling "as if I were on a sort of pilgrimage, visiting sacred sites." Even Shakespear's fiancée at home found the book, her guide and textbook, an almost religious experience. Exploration was not merely travel in the physical space of Arabia but in the imaginative space of books. This is not to say agents felt espionage was impossible in Arabia but that they conceived of their work in fictional terms. Certainly, the fictional world conjured up by the *Odyssey* and the Bible, the sources of the cliché that ranks spying as the world's second oldest profession, situated them in an espionage world that was epic and mythic rather than quotidian. It is no wonder that their own published works were so riddled with pretensions to fiction.<sup>35</sup>

To many of these agent-authors, the war offered an opportunity to fulfill to the utmost their dreams of vital experience and storybook romance in the Middle East. Then, too, literature remained an important source of information about the region, rendering agents' work and the campaigns themselves even more pointedly mythic. Kipling's stories, Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and the works of Xenophon, Herodotus, and Thucydides were all regularly consulted for parallels with their own situation. With these grand narratives framing their outlook, it is no surprise that agents continued to define their own work in mythopoeic terms. *Arabia Deserta* remained a cherished *daily* source of inspiration and intelligence, and the Bible was ubiquitous. Archibald Wavell (cousin of the interloper in Mecca), a member of Allenby's staff (laying the foundations for his more illustrious career as World War Two commander in the Middle East and viceroy of India), later recalled how Allenby studied the Bible "with the passionate absorption of Cromwell's Ironsides, and . . . based his plans on the study of the wars of Joshua." He also devoured histories of the Crusades, "so convinced that in the unchanging East history would repeat itself that from the beginning he said that the decisive battle of the campaign would be fought at the Pass of Meggido." His troops "used the Bibles as guide books to Palestine, and remarkably fine ones they turned out to be!" affirmed Major Vivian Gilbert. En route to Jericho, and lacking any other information on the area, Gilbert planned the attack on Mukhmas by studying the tactics Jonathan used there, as recorded in the Book of Samuel.<sup>36</sup>

This epic and mythological sensibility shaped the entire British war effort in the Middle East, in a manner above and beyond the imaginative uses of literature on the Western front.<sup>37</sup> Agents took the war as an opportunity to fulfill the literary and mythopoeic impulses that had attracted them to the region, conceiving of it as the moment when the region's romantic qualities would be sharpened and their own, until now only provincial, heroism emerge on a world-historical stage. After all, an epic war in a land of epics could hardly take place without adventure heroes, which was the reputation agents from Arnold Wilson to Leachman to Lawrence acquired during the war, certainly among their own military followers. Compton Mackenzie, for one, dreamt of the formidable Deedes "in as many shapes and sizes as Jim Hawkins dreamed of that one-legged mariner who according to Billy Bones was the most dangerous of Flint's unemployed pirates." When this community met, the literary potency of their combined genius was electric: at a dinner in Cambridge attended by Ronald Storrs, the editor of the *TLS*, and others, Mackenzie exclaimed, "What a night it was!...woven out of Persia and Arabia, out of Egypt and Mesopotamia...Athens...and Rome." It was this romance that colored the war for those in the Middle East, in sharp contrast to the grim news from the Western front.<sup>38</sup>

Agents made sense of their wartime experiences through literary allusion, particularly to juvenile adventure fiction. If Lawrence took the part of the impish hero, his colleagues took that of his happy sidekick. Lloyd described his experiences behind enemy lines as an "adventure rather like a Henty novel—my companion was Lawrence." Even far from Lawrence's shadow, the circumstances of the Arabia agent recalled fiction time and again. In Mesopotamia, Harold Dickson felt "like the successful wanderer of musical comedy, who finds himself king in some unknown country." He was carrying on "in quite novel style—Captain Kettle and his adventures would perhaps be nearer the mark...I am acting the part in rare style." What made it all so "fictional" was his configuration of the Arab population as a den of spies: "hobnobbing with men you know are downright rascals...It is quite like one of Fennimore [*sic*] Cooper's story books and to be living through it all is great." Arab talk was "in the form of a parable...One feels quite biblical." He soon adopted such a rhetorical style himself, recounting, for instance, the story of the Prodigal Son while settling a tribal boundary dispute. In time, he took to calling his experiences "my 'odyssey'." He, like many of his colleagues, definitively placed himself in a fictional landscape; precedents for his bizarre tasks as an agent and governor were to be found only in the world of adventure fiction.<sup>39</sup>

As intelligencers, these individuals continued to feel like spies of lore rather than bureaucrats dealing with the practical exigencies of wartime

information collection. To Lawrence, Herbert's unmasking of "futile conspiracies" was "like the man who was Friday." Wandering about Athens at night in a black mask and black silk domino, Mackenzie fancied himself "the Caliph in the *Arabian Nights*." Storrs recorded an incident during his abortive journey to Riyadh when the political agent at Kuwait, thinking him an intruder at the consulate, pointed a gun at him, so that he "dreamt for the rest of the night that I was a spy flying for my life." Storrs *was* in fact a spy, but, in this episode in the Arabian interior, found himself transformed from the functionary that a real-life agent was to the adventurer-spy of fiction. (Significantly, Storrs's reading material in those days was the Bible, in Arabic, and the *Odyssey*.) Even while spying, agents aspired to the fictional ideal of espionage that they thought befit the Arabian spy-space. "Life is really quite like a page out of a novel," wrote an intelligence officer at Port Said:

The air vibrates with hushed whispers, the stairs . . . resound with the stealthy tread of stage villains, corpulent Egyptians with tarbooshes, down-at-heel Greeks. . . . We keep invisible ink, secret drawers and insoluble ciphers. Letters arrive by special messengers enclosed in two or three envelopes covered with mystical seals, while the least member of the organization is known by a number and the greatest by a single letter. . . . We pass to outsiders as ordinary staff officers about whose occupation the civilian may speculate, but only superficially fathom. Little do they realise that their every movement is watched, and that, as we sit in the hotel bars of an evening, we are gathering the threads of a case into our hands.

The spies' prewar literary efforts, together with novelists' engagement with Arabia and espionage, inspired wartime agents to fit their experiences to the scripts of fiction. Arabia was simply the most glamorous stage for intelligence. Hence, a proposal to gather intelligence in Romania elicited from Hogarth "the expression of a dramatist being invited to go out to Hollywood and work for the movies" (a demotion by contemporary standards). Bell thrilled at the opportunity the war offered to mold events into an epic scale: "We have had great talks and made vast schemes for the government of the universe," she exulted after Lawrence's visit to Basra in 1916. Dickson, on hearing of his posting to Kuwait, wrote home, "This time next year I expect you will find me at Hail in central Arabia leading a revolution and marrying the Amir of Najd's daughter!! Shades of Burton and Doughty."<sup>40</sup>

That agents actually strained to shape their wartime experiences in the image of literature, particularly epic literature, is perhaps most evident in the case of Lawrence, who remained stubbornly attached to Doughty's *Arabia Deserta* and, even more tellingly, a dog-eared copy of *Le Morte D'Arthur* during

the war. Medieval texts certainly informed experience on the Western front, but here they actually shaped the running of the campaigns. His head full of medieval mythology and “the poignant knowledge of his own aristocratic birth,” Lawrence went to Arabia determined to fulfill a secret destiny worthy of anything in the works dearest to him; he behaved, in Tidrick’s words, “as though he was one of that small group of people singled out for special attention by the gods, liable at any moment to be called on to perform some heroic task—or suffer some special degradation.” In him, all the medievalism and literariness cultivated by prewar agents came together to produce a vision of the ideal Arabia agent, whose escapades would be worthy of the most colorful memorialization. His coy communication was designed to preserve both his own heroic autonomy and that of the epic movement he purported to lead. “To make [Egypt] continue in sacrifice we must keep her confident and ourselves a *legend*,” he insisted. The epic quality of the revolt, its mythic appeal, what made all of London wait breathlessly for the latest intelligence digest from Cairo, was the product of the fertile mind of the agent who went to Arabia in search of adventure and did not rest until he had shaped events into one. Albert Hourani compellingly describes Lawrence’s postwar account, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926), as

an attempt to write an epic work about activities that themselves had been moulded by a person who intended to write about them. Lawrence’s ambition to write, his view of epic action based on his reading of ancient epics and of medieval romances, to some extent moulded his actions during the war. He later remoulded the epics in his book.

Indeed, Lawrence allegedly confided to a friend during the campaign that “if he [Lawrence] ever should feel as he contemplated the book he would write one day about it all, that a little heightened colour was needed here or there, he could always contrive a raid, or . . . goad Auda a little, and that would give him the ‘copy’ he needed in just that place.” The impulse to use intelligence in Arabia as a springboard for a literary career remained potent and became, if anything, even more effectual during the war. So, too, did the impulse to fulfill dreams in Arabia: the war offered Lawrence the ultimate opportunity to fulfill his schoolboy dreams of leading a personal crusade to liberate a people from bondage “as a kind of contemporary armed prophet.” He stated unequivocally that the revolt—which he billed as the “biggest thing in the Near East since 1550”—allowed him to give expression to his artistic urges and resurrect the “epic mode”:

I had had one craving all my life—for the power of self-expression in some imaginative form—but had been too diffuse ever to acquire a

technique. At last accident, with perverted humour, in casting me as a man of action had given me place in the Arab Revolt, a theme ready and epic to a direct eye and hand, thus offering me an outlet in literature, the technique-less art. Whereupon I became excited only over mechanism. The epic mode was alien to me, as to my generation. Memory gave me no clue to the heroic, so that I could not feel such men as Auda in myself. He seemed fantastic as the hills of Rumm, old as Mallory.

Like his prewar colleagues, Lawrence's "strongest motivation" during the war was "a personal one." His awareness of the peculiar coincidence of man and moment, of his power to convert fantasy into reality, eventually alarmed him: "Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that all was vanity," he would write, "but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, and make it possible. This I did." This was what the war allowed many an agent enchanted with Arabia to do—so completely in Lawrence's case that it cured him of "any desire ever to do anything for myself."<sup>41</sup>

### Intelligence in the Name of God

Besides functioning as a space for artistic escape and fulfillment, the region's biblical topography also cast a mystical aura around the war in the Middle East for many of its British participants. "Our eyes were often on the past," recalled the *Times* war correspondent (and novelist) Edmund Candler in Mesopotamia. "The arid tracts where our own troops and General Allenby's were fighting, and the desert between spanned the whole land of Holy Writ. . . . We had a supply dump not a hundred yards from the . . . spot where Jonah was cast up by the whale." The map they followed was sacred, not profane. The fall of Jerusalem and Baghdad were seen as more than events of modern history; they belonged to older narratives of the Crusades and ancient Rome. In their roles as administrators and intelligence-gatherers, agents like Dickson felt "Biblical." These were not the spontaneous fascinations of wartime but the product of the Edwardian period of intelligence-gathering in the region; the momentum of that early history owed as much to escalating geopolitical and cultural tensions as to a mounting sense of spiritual crisis among elite Britons.<sup>42</sup>

In Kipling's moral universe, "espionage in the service of empire and the quest for spiritual harmony are complementary activities," to borrow the words of Jon Thompson. And in this, too, it provided an early model for agents in

Arabia. They combined their intelligence adventures with a search for spiritual illumination. They did this as Edwardians, for the mind of turn-of-the-century cultural elites was wracked by uncertainties about politics, aesthetics, and social mores but also about basic conceptions of space and time. Modernity, in the form of such globe-shrinking technologies as steam power and electricity, had its disconcerting side. The historian and philosopher Edwyn Bevan wondered in 1918 “whether any increased acceleration in the rate of progress is possible—or even desirable for the mental stability of mankind” and pointed hopefully to the new Mesopotamian colony as a site for redemption. Uncertainties were also evoked by geologists, archaeologists, biologists, and physicists, whose work had destabilized faith in the ideas that had been the foundation of nineteenth-century faith in progress. In just over a century, explains Stephen Kern, “the age of the earth had oscillated from the cramped temporal estimates of Biblical chronology to the almost unlimited time scale of Lyell, down to Kelvin’s meager twenty million years, and then back up to hundreds of millions of years.” Within this infinite span, the history of humankind appeared parenthetical indeed.<sup>43</sup>

This atmosphere of profound uncertainty about the meaning of life and the universe, pervaded by regret at the passing of the old order and revulsion against the materialism and commercialism that seemed to be taking its place, produced in the late nineteenth century a mystical revival, which among the educated middle and upper classes took the form of a new interest in medieval and Renaissance Christian mysticism and various forms of spiritualism and the occult. Hence, for instance, the remarkable number of conversions to Roman Catholicism in this period, from which agents such as George Lloyd and Gerald Fitzmaurice were not exempt, making them even more sympathetic to Catholics Aubrey Herbert, Mark Sykes (converted at age three), and the wartime director of military intelligence George Macdonogh. Those inclined toward mysticism sought, as Alex Owen writes, an “immediate experience of and oneness with a variously conceived divinity.” Their interests extended to philosophical idealism and European vitalism and, in a cultural moment that was also the high watermark of popular interest in empire, spiritual alternatives derived from the East, broadly conceived, not least as a result of increasing exposure to the written works of colonial explorers and administrators abroad.<sup>44</sup>

All occultisms are founded on a claim of historical continuity, and it was on Arabia’s ancient past, in particular, that many turn-of-the-century occultists staked their claim. The occultist G. R. S. Mead compared the “rising psychic tide” in London to that which had inundated the Alexandria of Hellenistic times, “where Egypt and Africa, Rome and Greece, Syria and Arabia met

together,” and philosophy, science, religion, and theosophy of every sort swirled together in a mystical melting pot. This was by no means an arbitrary comparison, but one founded on, literally, groundbreaking research on the topic, for the cataract of books on Arabia was partly composed of a raft of popular works, such as W. St. Chad Boscawen’s *The First of Empires: “Babylon of the Bible”* (1904), R. Campbell-Thompson’s *Semitic Magic, Its Origins and Development* (1909), and Bell’s *Palace and Mosque at Ukhaidir* (1914), about or derived from contemporary archaeological coups in the region, often perpetrated by members of the intelligence community. This is not to minimize the importance of interest in Arabia’s purely biblical past—Thomas Cook’s “Holy Land Excursions” remained popular—but to place it within the larger framework of interest in Arabia as a spiritual place in a more general sense, where the syncretic, polytheistic, iconoclastic world of the occult survived, despite the monotheistic civilizations that serially held sway over it. Discoveries of ancient Babylonian myths, in which were recognized earlier versions of Biblical tales, only confirmed this view of the Arabian palimpsest.<sup>45</sup>

The new awareness of Arab contributions to “Western civilization”—Arab preservation of classic Greek scientific texts during the Dark Ages and the shared adulation for Aristotle, for instance—underwrote the Edwardian view of Arabia as European patrimony, a place where Britons might find their lost past and faith. Of late, remarked Campbell-Thompson in an anonymous review, people were happy “to admit to the people of those lands their proper position in the ancient world.” In Arabia’s complacent, anti-intellectual endurance was embodied an ironic affront to that old shibboleth “progress.” Meredith Townsend’s immensely influential *Asia and Europe* (1901) mused:

Imagine a clan which prefers sand to mould, poverty to labour, solitary reflection to the busy hubbub of the mart, which will not earn enough to clothe itself, never invented so much as a lucifer match, and would consider newspaper-reading a disgraceful waste of time. Is it not horrible, that such a race should be? more horrible, that it should survive all others? most horrible of all, that it should produce, among other trifles, the Psalms and the Gospels, the Koran and the epic of Antar?

The Arabian counterpoint seemed to invalidate all European claims to superiority during a period beset by a sense of imminent social and spiritual crisis. Archaeology and works such as J. G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890) helped turn received wisdom about civilizational difference on its head, strengthening an incipient cultural relativism over nineteenth-century theories of progressive development, which had seen Western

civilization as the vanguard of Civilization as such. This “change in sensibility,” in T. E. Hulme’s words, enabled Britons to appreciate the art and symbolic systems of ostensibly more primitive societies not only for its own sake but also, as Elleke Boehmer argues, as a means to “interpret the cataclysmically expanding and collapsing modern world.”<sup>46</sup>

In short, “the will to believe” was very much in the air,” as Samuel Hynes puts it, quoting William James, in his classic description of *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*. The Edwardian tourist, Hogarth likewise observed, sought not the “intelligible,” but visions of “the half-known, the unknown, and even the not to be known, craving the stimulus of infinite possibilities behind a half-drawn veil”; he looked to be reminded, “by finger-posts pointing into darkness, of the existence of a Beyond, but has really no sort of desire that the cloud should lift.” Hence his interest in Egypt, “where nothing is more than half known.” Here, “Egypt” functioned as a synecdoche for the entire spread of unmapped, unknown, phantasmagoric Arabia; it owed its magnetism to its position, “penned between illimitable silences. How little we know of those deserts!... the Arabian and Libyan bluffs... peopled with chimaeras and griffins.” Since the Romantics, Arabia’s infinite horizons had offered Britons a balm for personal sorrows, but in the twentieth century they offered an antidote to a society-wide nostalgia for faith.<sup>47</sup>

The admixture of spiritual and escapist fascinations with Arabia is evident in the fictional analogue of the agents’ real world. John Buchan wrote his Richard Hannay books partly out of a fascination with “the notion of hurried journeys,” from Homer to “the penny reciter,” which appealed to a “very ancient instinct in human nature.” For, he felt, it was when the “twin categories of time and space” came into conflict that “we get the great moment... Life is sharpened, intensified, idealised.” He turned to Arabia as more than the exotic Orient; he was attracted to it as an austere space, ideally suited to a journey-quest structure and thus an espionage tale. Arbuthnot, who, as an agent in Arabia, albeit fictional, can be counted on to “know” such things, describes the dawning of this new vision of Arabia:

The West knows nothing of the true Oriental. It pictures him as lapped in colour and idleness and luxury and gorgeous dreams. But it is all wrong... It is the austerity of the East that is its beauty and its terror... The Turk and the Arab came out of big spaces... They want to live face to face with God... to prune life of its foolish fringes and get back to the noble bareness of the desert... It is always the empty desert and the empty sky that cast their spell over them... It isn’t inhuman. It’s the humanity of one part of the human race.

He adds, “It isn’t ours” but then, remaining true to his liminal status, exclaims, “There are times when it grips me so hard that I’m inclined to forswear the gods of my fathers!” A better statement of the new desert orientalism, resounding with Edwardians’ own helpless attraction to it, would be difficult to find. The immense popularity of Buchan’s novel—its reminder that “fiction has often a basis of fact”—is a testament to the currency of these ideas at the time. Painting for the first time on such a vast geographical canvas, Buchan also liberally exploited the landscape’s biblical resonances, not least with the apotheosis at the climax: the image of the prophet Sandy leading the Russians to Erzurum.<sup>48</sup>

Other novelists also quietly fit desert Arabia into their armory of setting atmospherics and metaphors—not merely as an exotic setting or minimalist canvas, but as a vision of the occult world to which many of them were increasingly drawn. Yeats, for instance, would criticize Flecker’s *Hassan* (1922) for using the Orient as merely an exotic backdrop rather than a means for achieving greater philosophical depth. Modernists like Eliot, Pound, and Yeats found in Arabia a route back to “genuine mythic consciousness,” a space that seemed to invite abandonment of historical time and immersion in myth. They subscribed to the notion that the journey-quest was critical to attaining real metaphysical knowledge. In 1909, Yeats described his old longing “to disguise myself as a peasant and wander through the West. . . . Some day, setting out to find knowledge, like some pilgrim to the Holy Land, [the artist] will become the most romantic of characters.” The pilgrimage—journeys, quests, paths, and so forth—forms a leitmotif of his oeuvre, and its frequent destination “the shining holy city of Byzantium.” Yeats’s Arabic interests were part of his more general interest in the East—in China and India, especially—occasioned by his incessant dabbling in mysticism and the occult, but he saw Arabia in particular as the homeland of Magic. This is not to say that he looked to *Islam* for the sort of mystical inspiration he found in other religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism; rather, Arabia itself seemed to him the kind of place in which the spiritual and physical worlds coincided, where the mythic ethos he espoused actually existed, and where the roots of Western mysticism, both pagan and Biblical, were to be found. This is evident from his debt to Swedenborg’s doctrine of “the desolate places,” which described “a world of spirits” like the real world, but inhabited by itinerant souls. In this “other world of the early races”—presumably the ancient occult world of the Middle East—the imagination could thrive, while “our life in the cities, which deafens or kills the passive meditative life” renders “our souls less sensitive.” Primitives, he felt, “live always on the edges of vision.” Yeats’s effort to access this occult world of the *spiritus mundi* became critical to his entire ambition as an artist and was partly an attempt to

resurrect the primitive within him, that visionary primordial essence that possessed “knowledge innate.” He sought “an asceticism of the imagination” and urged the destruction of “Law and Number, for where there is nothing, there is God.” Once in the space of pure spirit, he enjoyed the company of an Arab daimon he met during a 1912 séance with Olivia Shakespear—the ghost of al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan al-Zayyati, a Renaissance explorer from Granada known in the West as Leo Africanus, whose works had recently come back into circulation (as part of the tide of interest in things Arabian) and would have been familiar to Yeats’s Arabist friends in the occultist order, the Golden Dawn. Communion with this daimon was critical to his formulation of the theory that artistic inspiration emanated from the interaction between the physical and spiritual worlds, that poetry was divine. This theory he took on faith, stating simply “like the Arab boy that became Vizier: ‘O brother, I have taken stock in the desert sand and of the sayings of antiquity.’” Arabia recalled for Yeats a vision of precolonial Ireland, where unspoiled Celts had also worshiped poetry as something divine. His, Pound’s, Buchan’s, and other authors’ admiration for the agents was based partly on the latter’s apparent substantiation of the supposed affinity between Britons’ subjugated mythic consciousness and Bedouin still embodying that ancient ethos. Indeed, Celtic sentiment ran equally high in agent circles: many insisted that only a Briton of “Celtic blood” could get on well with the Arabs. In a sense, Yeats’s ideas naturally echoed those embraced by the agents, given that, as one scholar puts it, he “lived at a time when it was natural for him to be aware of [the raft of new books on Arabia and the news of rising Arab nationalism], and he moved in the literary circles to which most of those who were enthusiastically interested in Arabia belonged.”<sup>49</sup>

Despite the influence of her social world, Virginia Woolf was not much of an occultist; however, her literary allusions to the desert were similarly concerned with matters of the spirit. In the Amazon, Rachel Vinrace finds escape from everyday life into a more profound reality when, for the first time, she opens the pages of Gibbon’s history of the Roman Empire to the part about “Aethiopia and Arabia Felix.” The incomparably “vivid” and “beautiful” words “seemed to drive roads back to the very beginning of the world, on either side of which the populations of all times and countries stood in avenues, and by passing down them all knowledge would be hers, and the book of the world turned back to the very first page.” Arabia was an archive of all time and knowledge, a bible spread out in space. Rachel dies by the end of the novel, fulfilling Woolf’s artistic aim of portraying “a vast tumult of life . . . which should be cut short for a moment by the death, and go on again,” most likely inspired by her brother Thoby’s sudden death from typhoid on their 1906 trip to Constantinople.

The head-space, if not the actual space, of Arabia, the land of the oldest such journeys, as Edwardians thought of it, seemed only appropriate to the descriptions of quests for profound existential knowledge and authentic lived experience that were central to much of contemporary literature.<sup>50</sup>

On the whole, occultists and modernists were probably more socially progressive than the agents, but both sought an opportunity to escape the strictures of modern life and enter the spirit-world of ancient Arabia. Agents were among those who looked to the Land of the Bible and the Tree of Knowledge as a metaphysical utopia. They did not go to Arabia in search of the sensual indulgence the Orient is generally supposed to have offered Europeans but to escape what they saw as the moral decadence of their *own* society. In Arabia, the supposed secularization of modern European travel seems to have unraveled under the suggestive power of the region's very nomenclature. There, as elsewhere, travel was conceived as a journey into the past, but this past was not merely further back on the secular time scale of modern history, but on a different scale altogether, outside secular time. Moving in the desert itself allowed the mind "wander into the past and . . . pry into the future," explained Sykes. In its supreme continuity, the queer way different eras continued to coexist in it at once, the desert was time spread out in space—a space in which the reality of the past endured in the present. Arabia's antiquity, its status as the site of the foundational myths of Western civilization, enveloped it in a mystique from which agents found it difficult to extricate their work. Carruthers wrote of his feeling, despite the absence of visible evidence, "that man has known this road from earliest antiquity," that he walked in a region "smothered with the dust of the ages . . . amongst a people . . . just stepped out of Genesis." Others were similarly disoriented and spent as much time investigating Biblical lore—Jonah's route, his tomb, the Tower of Babel, the Garden of Eden, Eve's tomb, Abraham's final resting place, among others—as they did gathering intelligence. Contemplation of this biblical topography invariably inspired musings on a luminously ethereal realm out of the ordinary, material world of the intelligence operative. Of course, enough havoc had been wreaked by nineteenth-century geology, archaeology, and biology to convince these travelers that the Bible was meant to be taken somewhat less than literally; to find the actual, historical Biblical sites on the ground was to locate themselves in a mythological landscape, in a time and space that, they knew, existed somewhere in the shadow of reality.<sup>51</sup>

Islamic holy sites, such as Mecca, were equally eerie. "It awes one by its strangeness" and the "almost tangible presence of the deity," testified Arthur Wavell, notorious intruder in the city. "One feels instinctively that one is looking on something unique: that there can be nothing else in the world the least like it." The effect of the "*genius loci*" was "almost uncanny." "Something in the

atmosphere,” affirmed Captain Bray, “appeals strongly to the imagination.” Likewise, in Karbala, Bell noted that nothing she *saw* but “the sense of having reached those regions which saw the founding of imperial Islam” was what “made the strongest assault on the imagination.” This sense removed agents’ missions from the realm of the real to the mythic, awesome, and unfathomable. What impressed them was Arabia’s *aura*, in the sense that Walter Benjamin would soon give to the word; there, unlike mechanical Europe, they found things that seemed utterly unique and embedded in local tradition. There, art remained intact and authentic. Travelers were beset by the difficulty of finding words adequate to, rather than braced for a “mechanical reproduction” of, what they saw and heard.<sup>52</sup>

The Biblical and Koranic were only two layers in the topographical accretion of Arabian mythologies. Intelligence agents proved as susceptible to the region’s occult traditions as their compatriots at home. Desert travel was travel back in historico-mythical time, but also into the “mysterious yet familiar world of childhood,” which for a generation raised on the *Arabian Nights*, was most often a pantheistic world of genies and spirits. Sykes was convinced of the supernatural powers of wandering poets, mystics, madmen, and dervishes of the desert—and told friends at home so. The origen Carruthers sought were “phantom beasts moving in a silent and supernatural world,” vanishing in the darkness “as if by magic!” “Peopled mainly by the spirits of the Arabian Nights, where little surprise would be occasioned in . . . seeing a genie floating in a stream of thin vapour out of a magic bottle,” this landscape possessed, to the military attaché Colonel Maunsell, “a fascination of scenery . . . unlike any other part of the world.” At once a nightmare and a dreamland, it was wreathed in “an atmosphere of unreality.” There they could find intact all the world’s forgotten fiction: “beliefs which have been driven out with obloquy by a new-found truth, the half-apprehended mysticism of the East, echoes of Western metaphysics and philosophy, illusive memories of paganism.” This “occult world, or ghost-land” was the template that generated all religions, the “immovable” source of Arabia’s essential changelessness. In the war, the numinous landscape continued to resist incorporation into the material world. “Of Azrak, as of Rumm,” Lawrence explained, “one said ‘*Numen inest.*’” The peninsular desert was “fantastic to the point of unreality.” Jeddah was “a strange and uncanny place,” recorded Hogarth, “rather what one sees in a disordered dream.” In this hallucinatory Arabia, agents’ wartime work took on a mythic quality; the British arrival at Baghdad, the city of the *Arabian Nights*, itself appeared a “kind of mirage trick.” “Even the East itself provides no true analogy to Arabian conditions,” affirmed Captain William Ormsby-Gore of the Arab Bureau: “Arabia we must approach with an open

mind.” Wartime agents endorsed prewar inclinations toward epistemological broadmindedness in understanding this utterly ineffable place.<sup>53</sup>

What they knew from their experience in the mundane world, at least, was useless. Wandering deeper and deeper into Arabia, a “new world,” a “Valley of the Genii,” Carruthers told himself, “We are now in Arabia. . . . We have to forget that we ever saw green woods, and flowing rivers. . . . These things are forbidden.” Its “uncanniness” made it positively extraterrestrial. He felt “suddenly transplanted to the . . . moon.” To function there, affirmed another traveler, you had to “disentangle” yourself from the “net in which you have all this time been unconsciously enveloped.” During the war, agents continued to remark this otherworldly quality and its provocation to the imagination. Unlike India, they pronounced, Arabia was “still unknown, unwritten and romantic,” “another universe.” As a political officer with the Muntafiq, Dickson felt “quite at the End of the World, regularly cut off.” Just as occultists were making their astral journeys to barren planets with winged guides, Arabists were journeying to Arabia and found themselves beyond the pale of the planet they called home.<sup>54</sup>

If this kind of astral travel rendered their existing knowledge useless, it did promise—for agents as much as occultists—a new kind of knowledge: greater insight into the nature of that increasingly incomprehensible contrivance, reality. In Baghdad, Bell reflected on the colorful sights and people she had witnessed, “and . . . truth, which lies somewhere concealed behind them all.” Arabia transported agents from the real to the mythical world and their missions from the physical to the metaphysical realm. It attracted agents seeking refuge from Edwardian science as much as those in search of faith. Bell told an Iraqi *kadi* that “prophets alone,” which Europe did not have, could “distinguish the true from the false.” When the *kadi* pointed to Europe’s men of science, she replied: “They know nothing. . . . Their eyes have explored the stars, yet they cannot tell us the meaning of the word infinity.” She and other agents looked to Arabia’s deserts for the existential certainty denied by European life. The birthplace of three monotheistic religions, all of which began with prophets who saw visions and heard voices, it was *the* place for miraculous conviction. As Sykes put it, if certainty could not be found in the cradle of civilization, which had produced the longest lasting certainties of all time, then perhaps it could not be found anywhere.<sup>55</sup>

The desert’s minimalism was thus ideal for spiritual as much as aesthetic redemption. There, wrote Bell, “the mind ranged out unhindered . . . and thought flowed as smoothly as the flowing stream.” Its vastness and changelessness “filled the eyes, and satisfied, for the moment, the most restless mind.” There, affirmed a tourist, “you are conscious of battling against primeval forces akin to the unknown elements of your own being. . . . All the little accessories

with which we have learnt to shield ourselves fall away, and you are just there, stripped yourself, and in the middle of naked realities." In "naked" Arabia, one was closer to, because more aware of, the Creator. There one could glimpse a topographical manifestation of divine cosmic order and penetrate the "great abiding truths" that were buried at home where everything was "dressed up." With "mingled fascination and terror," it also produced a feeling of being "lost in the immensity of a silent death-like solitude of infinitely sinister aspect," wrote Soane. Sykes described the "horror" of this "one great stretch of dead, forgotten desolation" and considered, "Some day when the world dies its corpse will be like this." Even the desert's more decadent phenomena, such as mirages, seemed visions vouchsafed by God—"Can we not forgive the error in mistaking the wondrous works for the builder's hand itself?" asked Sykes. The desert's unique natural phenomena inspired a suspension of disbelief and invited credulity based on faith rather than scientific proof. The Creator's unseen power was expressed physically "in these barren regions of the earth," whence it appealed "through our eyes and ears to the regions in us beyond these senses." The agents were after a knowledge which, for all its physicality, was ultimately beyond empiricism. Sykes reasoned, "It is not strange that a man who lives in a desert—where there is one day, one night, one silence, one sky and one horizon—should know that there is one God." The dramatic landscape seemed to confirm what they had thought of as the more fantastical elements of the Bible. Bell noted, "The Ark and all the rest become quite comprehensible when one sees Mesopotamia in flood time." The Bible's topographical nomenclature, such as "the oak which is in [unreadable]," seemed less odd, for "one often in official descriptions noted similar landmarks—'the village with the tree', because there was not another tree for twenty miles." The Saidian school's saga of unremitting, European "othering" of the Orient, premised on a secularization which "loosened, even dissolved, the Biblical framework," glosses over the lingering perception, at least among Edwardians, that Arabia was an ancient biblical homeland to which they *returned* in their travels, in an act that was at once a reclamation of an ancient past and of a flagging contemporary faith (and an important element in their proprietary attitude toward the place). Time and again, travelers were reminded of Mohammed's epiphany in the desert—of how, under circumstances strikingly similar to their own solitary wanderings, he must have moved from feeling "trivial" to a sense of his own share in the "primeval forces" as "the Silence of the desert" responded to the silence in "the region you are dimly conscious of beyond your senses." Thus too did the tourist Louisa Jebb come to feel what she could not feel in the crowds of London—undeniably *significant*. The desert could restore the faith sacrificed to centuries of enlightenment and materialism, a faith based not on proof or scientific

reasoning, but on an innate knowledge given free rein in an essentially liberating landscape. Yeats's views of primitives and Arabia find an echo not only in the work of contemporary anthropologists, but also in Sykes's: "The desert is of God and in the desert no man may deny Him. In the bazaars the voices of men . . . kill the knowledge innate." The Edwardian would never proclaim, as had the audacious Victorian Alexander Kinglake, "I was here in this . . . desert, and I myself, and no other, had charge of my life."<sup>56</sup>

An at least temporary exchange of the Victorian ideal of progress for the life of aimless drift seemed critical to gaining metaphysical insight to this generation. Many described how cutting loose from civilization enabled them to live and enjoy the present, content without any particular desire to *reach* anywhere. "Existence suddenly seems to be a very simple matter," Bell discovered, "and one wonders why we plan and scheme, when all we need to do is to live and make sure of a succeeding generation." Wandering itself unraveled the knots of the overcivilized mind and opened up that mystical space outside the senses. Hogarth insisted:

To be at once a Scholar and a Wanderer is to indulge the least congruous desires. . . . For the "wandering fever" is in a sense a temptation of original sin, still heard across the ages, and the scholar finds a subtle joy in the returning to the wilderness rather in spite than because of his being a scholar.

And therein lies the danger to him. . . . He is an agent of science, a collector of raw material for the studies of other men. But the life of the Wanderer, himself a law to himself, conduces to a certain Bohemian habit of mind.

The very fulfillment of their missions, through travel, entailed the forsaking of those missions in favor of profounder quests. The desert could "brace and quicken the spirit"; it could restore the deadened soul to a vitalized state. There, where meaning was never superficial, physical activity, gestures, acquired meaning; the very act of going to the desert to witness the faith was intended to counter geologists' arguments against Biblical truth with symbolic action; even prayer, otherwise "a ritual of empty words," became "strangely relevant" in "Nature's loneliness."<sup>57</sup>

The interest in primitivism was thus as much a spiritual as an aesthetic fascination. These troubled souls—for that is how many of the agents thought of themselves—explicitly hoped to emulate Arabs' primitive certainties, as they understood them, for to be primitive was to *know*, without resorting to Cartesian

proofs and the rest of rationalist Western philosophy, whether human existence mattered and whether, regardless of the latest scientific discoveries, there was a God. Desert travel was held to be transformative; agents believed themselves to come back utterly changed, even estranged from European society. Bell both quailed at and gloried in the alteration the desert had wrought on her senses and mind. It had turned her into a “savage,” she wrote dramatically to Valentine Chirol, for she had “seen and heard strange things, and they colour the mind.... I come back... with a mind permanently altered.... Don’t... tell anyone that the me they knew will not come back in the me that returns.” Surely, a unique metamorphosis in the annals of intelligence history. Agents made belief and made believe in Arabia; they framed their intelligence journeys as philosophical odysseys, partly as cultural legatees of the Romantics, but more importantly, as Edwardians dealing with the peculiar social and cultural malaise that marked that time. Their sense of their experience echoed the closing lines of Walter de la Mare’s famous 1912 poem, “Arabia” (which Flecker greatly admired): “Still eyes look coldly upon me,/ Cold voices whisper and say—/ ‘He is crazed with the spell of far Arabia,/ They have stolen his wits away.’”<sup>58</sup>

This philosophical bent of mind colored the agents’ literary output; however much they appealed as adventure stories, their works also touched the spiritual nerve of Edwardian readers. In *Blackwood’s*, Bell urged inclusion of enlivening details in any “tale” of serious archaeological enterprise in a country “where unrecorded chapters of history... enrich every path” and distract even the “gravest explorer,” for, in such places, “awakened memory” returned to “the great majesty of the waste, to the encompassing silence of its nights and days, to the unbroken passage of its sun and stars from verge to verge of the world.” Accordingly, whereas Bury’s otherwise well-received book was criticized for devolving frequently into “a series of anecdotes,” Hogarth’s *Accidents of an Antiquary’s Life* (1910) was praised for its lessons on enduring and enjoying “the delightful privations and exciting perils of rough and frugal travel across regions of Asia and Africa rarely trodden by European feet.” Edwardian audiences, too, longed for the experience of the journey-quest with all its insights into existence. They looked to these works for a record of the mental inversion wrought by the desert sublime, for the very escape from science that had driven the agents to the region. Bell’s *The Desert and the Sown* was thus better received than her later work *Amurath to Amurath* (1911), which was said to contain “maturer science and less careless rapture.” Philip Baldensperger’s *The Immovable East* (1913) was lauded for its inclusion of various “tales”—anecdotes of weeks spent in the black tents of the Bedouin, parables drawn from local folklore, the visions of a dervish—and thus its reproduction of

the very atmosphere of an untutored society, wherein the frontier lines between the real and the supernatural are so shadowy as to be almost negligible; and whether he . . . listens to an acquaintance telling of adventures in the company of the Jinn, or . . . describes his own feats of endurance in the waters of Jordan . . . we accept all as reasonable items of human experience. His stories have the aroma of the camp fire and of the village hearth.

Edwardians wanted to consume records of travel not in actually existing Arabia but in the Arabia of legend, of the Bible and the ancient seat of occultism, conjured up by storytellers' smoke and mirrors—at least so they were told by the *TLS*'s anonymous reviewers, who were of course none other than the agents themselves. Indeed, some narratives even took stylistic inspiration from the Bible.<sup>59</sup>

However inspired it was by fiction, the real world of Arabia intelligence, with all its outpouring of philosophical and metaphysical insight, was critical to the creation of latter-day fictional odysseys like *Greenmantle*. Arabia travelogues—and the agents' sensibility—were framed by a wider set of literature dealing with travel and, especially, ruminative travel in the vicinity of Arabia; their accounts, in turn, framed the Edwardian public's idea of Arabia. To be sure, Russia also featured in spy fiction as a vast playground for secret agents, passions, and those with an occult knowledge of the universe, such as the iconic Madame Blavatsky, but it appealed precisely because these qualities made it more Asian than European in British eyes—its fascination was derivative. In any case, its utter topographical worldliness and the image of a drunken and ignorant populace made it a decidedly secondary fascination.<sup>60</sup>

In this feeble tracing on the vast topography of early-twentieth-century British culture is evident the ubiquity of the association of a hazy, surreal, otherworldly, and yet more *real*, because less mundane, reality with Arabia. In multifarious formats and fora, the rising tide of interest in Arabia flooded Edwardian society, just as that society had begun to steep itself in the deep waters of metaphysical enquiry. At the confluence of these two cultural currents was a vision of an occult space of pure spirit in which agents and other Edwardians found escape. The Orient had always served as a counterpoint in Western literature, but in this period authors used their idea of Arabia in a new way, to evoke a new vision of existence as such. If Edwardians rummaging through Eastern philosophies in search of an antidote to spiritual angst admitted a new sense of relativity that rendered their own image and world strange and dreamlike (as Elleke Boehmer has argued), Arabia, by implication, began to appear less strange, more natural even, a place that precluded existential

confusion, historical meaninglessness, and civilizational captivity. While modernists condemned the cold quantification of time and the annihilation of the natural rhythm of human experience as harmful of human creative potential, British agents in the Middle East showed the world a living space of nomadism where they had successfully excavated their own buried creative potential. In short, the intelligence project in Arabia was inflected with a metaphysical and affective dimension—and a solipsism—that set it quite apart from information-gathering projects elsewhere in the world: British spies in the Middle East were as interested in the deepest secrets of creation as in politically and militarily useful information. A particular cultural lens refracted what they saw and, as we shall now see, how they saw it and reported it.<sup>61</sup>

# 7

## Air Control

“You have to understand the Arab mind,” Capt. Todd Brown, a company commander with the Fourth Infantry Division, said as he stood outside the gates of Abu Hishma. “The only thing they understand is force—force, pride and saving face.”

—Dexter Filkins, “Tough New Tactics by U. S. Tighten Grip on Iraq Towns,” *New York Times*, December 7, 2003

The camp commander [at Guantanamo], Rear Adm. [Harry B.] Harris, said he did not believe the men [three detainees] had killed themselves out of despair. “They are smart. They are creative, they are committed,” he said. “They have no regard for life, either ours or their own. . . . This was not an act of desperation, but an act of asymmetrical warfare waged against us.”

—“Guantanamo Suicides a ‘PR Move,’” BBC News, June 11, 2006

Satan being thus confined to a vagabond, wandering, unsettled condition, is without any certain abode; for though he has, in consequence of his angelic nature, a kind of empire in the liquid waste or air, yet this is certainly part of his punishment, that he is continually hovering over this inhabited globe of earth; swelling with the rage of envy at the felicity of his rival, man; and studying all the

means possible to injure and ruin him; but extremely limited in his power, to his unspeakable mortification.

—Daniel Defoe, *The History of the Devil*, 1726

Against the backdrop of official paranoia, Britain devised a new surveillance technology in Iraq known as “air control.” With it, intelligence in the Middle East became fully “operational,” and the downy dream of technocratic development was turned inside out to reveal its rugged militarist lining. Air control was an example of that “rebellion of technology” that, for Walter Benjamin in 1937, defined “imperialistic war”: “Instead of draining rivers, society directs a human stream into a bed of trenches; instead of dropping seeds from airplanes, it drops incendiary bombs over cities.” In the air control scheme, the RAF collapsed the mission of regenerating Babylonia into the more urgent task of patrolling the country from a network of bases and coordinating information from agents on the ground to bombard subversive villages and tribes. To be sure, airpower was also used elsewhere in the empire in 1919, in what have been termed “spasmodic, almost casual affairs”; it was in Iraq that the British would rigorously practice, if never perfect, the technology of bombardment as a permanent method of colonial administration and surveillance and there that they would fully theorize the value of airpower as an independent arm of the military.<sup>1</sup>

Air control was cheap, as many contemporaries and scholars have noted, but reasons of cost would have applied equally elsewhere—indeed, after an incubatory period in Iraq, modified versions of air control were exported to other parts of the empire. The scheme’s cheapness helped sell the idea to the cabinet but cannot explain its initial formulation for Iraq. Indeed, other European and Arab powers in the region would also have felt the need to economize, but none developed a regime as skeletally austere or dependent on total air substitution as the British.<sup>2</sup> How did the British come to invent an unprecedented scheme, relying on a new technology whose uses had yet to be fully imagined, specifically for Iraq? The explanation lies in the realm of cultural history, in the agents’ confidence that Iraq was a place peculiarly suited to aerial surveillance and far enough beyond the pale of bourgeois “convention” to moot concerns about inhumanity—in any case, their intimate knowledge of the place, evidenced by this representation, would guarantee humane application of the system. When Whitehall opened its arms to this community of agents, it invited in their way of thinking and decision-making. The spark of innovation that had ignited the Middle Eastern campaigns would now set the region itself ablaze.

## The Fantasy

Demobilization remained a distant dream for British troops charged with confronting the anticolonial rebellions of 1919–21. As the situation in the Middle East grew dire, British officials searched desperately for a way to avert evacuation. Arabist intelligence agents emerged fervent proponents of airpower in general and the air control scheme in particular. Lawrence dated both his interest in joining the service and his conviction that “aircraft could rule the desert” to the war. Contemporaries too numbered him “first to realize” that air control would allow control without occupation. Winston Churchill, secretary of war and air, had long been intimate with the community of Arabist agents, through common social networks and a shared sensibility besides wartime contact and close cooperation at the Peace Conference. He too wagered that airpower might be used creatively to maintain order in the Iraqi mandate after the war. Geoffrey Salmond, whom Hugh Trenchard, the chief of Air Staff, dispatched to the region to assess the efficacy of Churchill’s suggestion, was at once taken with the idea of using airpower to integrate the region into an administrative whole. Lawrence, then a fellow at Oxford, assisted in the RAF’s subsequent efforts to devise a workable scheme, as did Iraq’s civil commissioner, Arnold Wilson. (It was partly out of gratitude that Trenchard, who was often an outcast in official circles and felt strangely at ease in the company of Bell and Lawrence, helped Lawrence secure a place in the ranks in 1922, where he remained an influential presence until his death in 1935.) All this was made easier when Churchill, as colonial secretary, inducted Lawrence, Bullard, Young, and Meinertzhagen (an old friend of Trenchard’s and of the new air secretary, Frederick Guest) into his new Middle East Department.<sup>3</sup>

These various experts deemed Mesopotamia *peculiarly* suitable for air operations, better than Europe, for aesthetic as much as topographical reasons: its presumed flatness promised many landing grounds, little cover to insurgents, and the possibility of “radiating” British power throughout the country from a handful of fittingly spartan bases, while the reality of its varied and protean topography, when acknowledged, was held to offer ideal training for the RAF, exposing it to every sort of terrain—mountains in Kurdistan, marshes in the south, riverain territory in between, and so forth. The difficulties of communication in Iraq made “the idea of using aircraft” “extremely tempting”; they could annihilate distance in hours. Air action was deemed *inappropriate* for police action in the densely populated urban environments of Britain, Ireland, and even Palestine. It was expressly framed as an updated approach to “small wars.” Lawrence insisted, “The system is *not* capable of universal application.”<sup>4</sup>

The agents perceived a basic congruence between the liberty of action of the aircraft and the desert warrior, both operating in empty, unmapped, magical spaces. The airplane was a winged irregular. Lawrence prophesied: "What the Arabs did yesterday the Air Forces may do to-morrow. And in the same way—yet more swiftly." Both could move beyond mere concentration of force and replace it with "an intangibly ubiquitous distribution of force—pressing everywhere yet assailable nowhere." Like the equally "splendid" tanks, aircraft embodied an austere, modernist reinvention of chivalric warfare. He joined the RAF himself for this reason and for the inevitable opportunity for fresh literary inspiration. "Since I was 16 I've been . . . steadily getting better," he explained to Trenchard. "My last book on Arabia is nearly good. I see the sort of subject I need in the beginning of your Force." (He eventually wrote *The Mint*.) As in Arabia, now again he wanted to "shed his past and *live* the part" in the hope that the rhythm of flight, like the camel's plod, would collapse sensation into artistic insight. His views were echoed by Glubb, Philby, Bell, and others, and found greater amplification in the RAF itself. "There appears to be a sort of natural fellow-feeling between these nomad arabs and the Air Force," remarked Robert Brooke-Popham, both before and after he had served as air commander in Iraq. "Perhaps both feel that they are at times in conflict with the vast elemental forces of nature." The parallels agents had drawn between British skills at sea and in the desert were now extended to the air (indeed, as Hew Strachan notes, aircraft took war to civilians in the manner of old-fashioned maritime blockade). The "desert with all its mysterious fascination" had "an unreal atmospheric quality comparable with the sky. Perhaps," pondered a wing commander, "this is why people call it 'The Blue.'" Their quiddities were the same. Hence, perhaps, the airplane's obvious suitability to exploration of desert lands; Lawrence foresaw it opening up and rendering comprehensible the still stubbornly blank spot of the Rub al-Khali, a project he passionately (if unsuccessfully) advocated long after he had otherwise departed from the Arabian scene.<sup>5</sup>

Air control, like irregular warfare, was designed to work in a country "where news flies on the wings of the wind." Speed allowed aircraft to counter tribesmen's ability to anticipate, through this prolific flow of news, the arrival of ground forces. "The punishment, like the news, will fly on the wings of the wind," explained Flight Lieutenant C. J. Mackay in a prize-winning essay for the Royal United Service Institute. If it failed to, the target could simply be changed. Moreover, aircraft would turn to advantage the region's systematic exaggeration of information: where there was one plane, Arabs would spread news of dozens; a few casualties would instill fear of hundreds. Iraq's lack of natural borders would enable aircraft to use disinformation as a practical strategy (the recourse to ungentlemanly "bluff" spun as proof of the British

willingness to take risks, use new technology, and rely on “racial superiority”). Trenchard envisioned a single imperial air force dispatched like a navy, in fleets, with Baghdad the “pivot” of an imperial air route from England to Cairo to Karachi to Singapore, along which reinforcements could be moved economically between theaters. The “moral effect” of air control upon subversives would derive partly from “this ocular demonstration of the linking up of the British garrisons in their midst with forces of unknown strength outside their ken.” Power would lie off-stage, just as it did when irregulars gestured at an “unknown quantity” of supporters in the desert fastness. The logistics of the interwar strategic doctrine of maximum projection of and minimum actual use of force depended on a particular conception of the kind of space the new Arabian empire was.<sup>6</sup>

These spatial conceptions were of special consequence in the shadow of Whitehall’s conspiracy-theory explanations of the Iraqi insurrection. Air control was designed for a population conceived of as congenitally insurgent, an always incipient guerrilla army lacking any agency of its own but available for exploitation by an external agent. As counterinsurgent aerial guerrillas, the British, too, would be elusive. Air control (with the help of wireless technology) would at once raise the apparatus of imperial rule out of reach of these “stubborn races” and create a surveillance regime capable of coping with nomad existence and porous desert borders: “The ‘long arm’ of the new weapon renders it ubiquitous . . . [and] makes it practicable to keep a whole country under more or less constant surveillance.” It was an ideal system for the information problems they faced in the Middle East. Through air control, the agents could realize in a new dimension the controversial postwar dream of a regionwide intelligence web (see chap. 8). It was essentially a system of control by intelligence, the epitome of the new operational intelligence, with aircraft substituting for the political officer who had long combined the tasks of intelligence and administration. Indeed, earlier brainstorming about ways to reduce the occupying garrisons in Mesopotamia had contemplated replacing them with a skeletal network of political officers, each individually capable of projecting as much, if not more, power than a garrison; air control was the mechanical apotheosis of this notion, minus the Achilles’ heel of susceptible health. Like intrepid Arabist agents, aircraft would allow the British to segue into, even manage, the magical information network. The “official version” would “get around quicker,” checking the contortions of information passed “by the natives from mouth to mouth.” The Air Staff warranted, “Frequent friendly patrols, dropping leaflets containing suitable propaganda; disseminating correct news, and preventing the wilful misinterpretation of the orders of a political officer by intriguing headmen, may often prevent the seeds of unrest being sown by irresponsible

agitators.” Aircraft, like conspiracy thinking, provided the security of *imagined* omniscience to an empire in the throes of rebellion.<sup>7</sup>

It was in this paranoid atmosphere that Lawrence and Churchill obtained approval of the scheme at the Cairo Conference of 1921, attended by luminaries of the Arabia intelligence and political establishment. The RAF officially took over in Iraq in October 1922, although it had become the dominant military force during the rebellion. It commanded eight squadrons of fighters and light bombers, several thousand Iraq Levies, and four armored car units (staffed by many former Black and Tans—an empirewide counterinsurgency staff for an apparently empirewide insurgency). Like airplanes, armored cars “showed their true paces” in Iraq. (In 1919, Lawrence, who had found them critical to being “everywhere at once” in the war, had approached J. F. C. Fuller on the question of using tanks in Arabia, which the latter considered “a fairy tale . . . unless he could provide the magic carpet”—a condition apparently filled by the air control regime.) Army garrisons were gradually whittled back to protect only the nine RAF bases. The last British battalion left in 1927; the last Indian, in 1928. The short range of most available aircraft made advanced landing grounds and emergency fuel and bomb dumps important. Air action was used against Turkish and Najdi raiders (at a time when frontiers were very much a work in progress) as well as Kurds and Arabs within Iraq proper. Theoretically, the levies were to be the first responders to unrest, followed by an “air demonstration” and dropped messages threatening hostile action, then action against livestock, and as a last resort, against villages—but theory was not implemented in practice, as we shall see. In a single two-day operation, a squadron might drop several dozen tons of bombs and thousands of incendiaries and fire thousands of rounds of small arms ammunition.<sup>8</sup>

This arrival of aircraft in Iraq was, as we have seen, understood in the same romantic developmental vein as the entire conquest of Mesopotamia. But besides restoring the cradle of civilization to its rightful position on the map of global commerce and communications, aircraft themselves, as a sophisticated technology, exercised a more traditional “civilizing effect,” not least by demonstrating the advanced state of British civilization. The famous “furrow” ploughed across the desert to guide pilots on the air route to Baghdad was lauded as a feat of British ingenuity. The “romance” of desert flight derived from the “demonstration of the power of modern inventions which are able to conquer vast open spaces of the world . . . little known to civilised man”; technology remained the handmaiden of progress. The air also afforded a lofty view from which to observe the effects of the new, loftier imperialism, to witness “adoring Asia kindle and hugely bloom,” in the poetic allusion of the *Illustrated London News*. (It also fittingly revealed the otherwise invisible traces left by their ancient

imperial forbears.) Aerial surveillance and disciplining fit neatly into this vision of liberal empire in the sky. Flying over the desert on behalf of the Foreign Office, Hubert Young “felt that a new era had dawned, and that with the goodwill of His Majesty’s Government and the powerful help of the Royal Air Force the Arabs of Iraq would undoubtedly win their independence at last.” Moreover, a wing commander argued irresistibly, “the cheaper the form of control the more money for roads and development and the sooner it will be no longer necessary to use armed forces to do with explosives what should be done by policemen and sticks.”<sup>9</sup>

Despite these hopes and the promise of omniscience, the air control regime was plagued by frequent reports of pilot disorientation, visibility problems, and instances “of quite inexplicable failures to identify such objects as columns of Armoured cars . . . and even whole sections of bedouin tribes on the move.” It was not uncommon for aircraft to make a “demonstration” over or bomb the wrong town. It also turned out that “hostile parties” could find cover in watercourses, hillocks, and other features of the “featureless” landscape. Assessing the effect of bombing operations was “largely a matter of guesswork.” However, in an infamously deceptive land, all this inaccuracy, indeed information itself, was of little consequence: Arnold Wilson dourly explained that complaints about RAF observation failures were necessarily exaggerated, as was all information in the country, not least because the mirage prevented anyone from judging the accuracy of a pilot on high. Moreover, in the end, accuracy itself was moot, since aircraft were meant to be everywhere at once, “conveying a silent warning.” This “*moral effect*” of patrolling aircraft “which can drop Bombs whenever necessary would effectually check disturbances.” Air control was intended to work like the classic panopticon, for “from the ground every inhabitant of a village is under the impression that the occupant of an aeroplane is actually looking at *him* . . . establishing the impression that all their movements are being watched and reported.” Even if pilots could not be sure whether they were looking at “warlike” or “ordinary” tribes, Bedouin would behave because *they* could not discriminate “between bombing and reconnaissance expeditions.” Thus, despite innumerable reported errors, the air control experiment was pronounced entirely successful in “this kind of turbulent country.” Lord Thomson, air secretary in 1924, even spoke of bombing’s “all-seeing power” in the “clear atmosphere of Iraq”; the infamous haze had apparently obliged political expedience. In its Iraqi cocoon, the RAF was safe from criticism of its accuracy, protected by the notorious fallibility of all news emerging from Arabia. Within a decade, modified air control schemes would spread to “areas where conditions are similar”—Palestine, Transjordan, Aden, and further afield—and experts would disparage as “absurd” the increasingly inconvenient contention

that “some peculiar quality about the country . . . has enabled aircraft to achieve in Iraq what they could not achieve anywhere else.”<sup>10</sup>

### The Defense of Inhumanity

Irregular warfare, as Lawrence understood it, could be bloodless because it depended less on attack than on the “silent threat of a vast unknown desert.” Likewise, proponents of air control frankly admitted that “terror” was the scheme’s underlying principle—and the source of its humaneness, which some explicitly traced to Lawrence’s guerrilla theory. In theory, terror inspired by occasional demonstrations of destructive power would awe tribes into submission. Alternatively, interference with its victims’ daily lives, through destruction of homes, villages, fuel, crops, and livestock, would “infallibly achieve the desired result.”<sup>11</sup> Of course, the inhumanity of the system ultimately stemmed from its inability to distinguish between combatants and noncombatants, a conflation no less iniquitous in the case of violent impoverishment of villages than in simple massacre of them. And, as early RAF statements openly acknowledged, the moral effect depended on demonstrations of exemplary violence, which could hardly be accomplished without loss of life—as even the covetous army warned, the “moral effect of a plane that mustn’t bomb . . . is less than that of an infantry man who can at least arrest.” In any case, theory aside, however diligent the RAF may have been in giving warnings by loudspeaker, leaflets, and “demonstration flights,” the “pacification” of Iraq proved horrifically costly in Iraqi lives—a hundred casualties was not unusual in a single operation, not to mention those lost to starvation and the burning of villages. “Recalcitrant” tribes, which included not only those attacking British communications and personnel but also those refusing to pay taxes, ultimately had to be bombed into submission. Entire villages were bombed for “general recalcitrance”—refusal to submit to government—and for harboring wanted rebel leaders, providing the lessons of an emerging science of bombing. Attempts to reduce abuses by “cooling” impulsive requests for bombers in red tape did not curtail bombing for taxation and recalcitrance. Defenders of air control effectively allowed its moral effect to become a synecdoche for the entire regime.<sup>12</sup>

The antiseptic theory of moral effect in fact responded to a potent moral critique that stalked the regime even before it was fully in place, building on outrage about the Amritsar Massacre of April 1919 and quickly overtaking pro-saic skepticism of the regime rooted in interservice jealousy. Besides a few local agents’ concerns about the rampant bombing of villages, Churchill and other Whitehall observers were also at least momentarily aghast at the news from

Iraq. Hubert Young and his partisans criticized the Mesopotamian administration for bombing resisters of a tax that, they alleged, *was* in fact higher than the Turkish rate had been. The new war secretary offered this unsparing assessment: "If the Arab population realize that the peaceful control of Mesopotamia depends on our intention of bombing women and children, I am very doubtful if we shall gain that acquiescence of the fathers and husbands of Mesopotamia as a whole to which the Secretary of State for the Colonies looks forward." This trenchant critique was amplified in the press and Parliament, where many had looked upon the Iraqi venture as outdated imperial foolishness from the very outset (see chap. 9).<sup>13</sup>

All this official displeasure quickly elicited papers from the Air Ministry on the effects of bombing on "semicivilised and uncivilised tribes." Ultimately concluding, as any properly dithering bureaucracy would, that sufficient time had not elapsed to prove its effects, the ministry also reminded its colleagues that air control was not unique in eliding the distinction between combatants and civilians. "All war is not only brutal but indiscriminate in its brutality," affirmed the Air Staff, pointing to the effects on civilians of naval bombardment, shelling of a city, blockading, trampling by invading armies, or the bombing of military facilities; at least the lives of attackers were safer in air operations. The Air Staff and Air Ministry adopted the voice of the realist, presenting stark realities unblinkered by sentimentality. Some of their supporters even insisted, paradoxically, on "the great humanity of bombing," for, however "ghastly"—indeed, *because* so ghastly—the experience of "continual unending interference with their normal lives" forced the enemy to give up quickly, thereby preventing untold further losses. Churchill might have looked back with pride at his hand in developing a system based on the "minimal use of force"—a foundational moment in the evolving myth of British skill in counterinsurgency—but at the time, the violence of air control was openly acknowledged. The question is what made it acceptable.<sup>14</sup>

The Great War had certainly shifted notions about humanity and warfare; to many military thinkers, the moral imperative was to minimize casualties as a whole rather than civilian deaths in particular, since modern combatants were merely civilians in uniform.<sup>15</sup> Thus, in 1930, Air Secretary Thomson replied to Lord Cavan's criticism of air control by affecting surprise that Cavan, "who had seen so much war, should still believe that one could humanize it." Clearly, he elaborated, the most "insidious way of prolonging war as a means of settlement between nations was to endeavour to make it a gentlemanly occupation." Nevertheless, the Air Staff's defense did not really address the concerns of those who were equally offended by modern war's general brutality or of those who (rightly) considered aerial bombardment, in its all-seeing omnipotence, more lethal and terrible than older forms of barbarity. But most saliently, for my

purposes, their counterexamples—naval bombardment, blockades, and the like—were all *wartime* measures. The Air Staff paper was meant to discuss bombing as a peacetime security measure, a policing technique, in “semi-civilised” areas of the world such as Iraq. What was permissible only in wartime in advanced countries turned out to be *always* permissible in Iraq. In his description of the admittedly appalling bombing in Iraq, Thomson acknowledged that these things happened “which, if they had happened before the world war, would have been undoubtedly acts of war.” It was thus that the RAF alone among the armed services maintained its “war-time spirit” in this period, “particularly . . . in Iraq.”<sup>16</sup>

Militarism was thus being perpetuated at precisely the moment that it had become marginalized as a political program and the myth of Britain as a uniquely peaceable kingdom had taken root.<sup>17</sup> How was this possible? It was not, I think, merely the result of racist conjuring—indeed, many airpower theorists based their faith in the bomber on the notion that people were the same everywhere and would respond in the same manner to its power<sup>18</sup>—but of the spatial packaging of the underside of British modernity, in which Arabia figured as the last bastion of the world free from bourgeois convention, a place of honor and bravery (however mindless), of manly sportsmanship and perennial conflict. Hence Lawrence’s investment in guerrilla warfare as a chivalrous and individualized mode of combat suited to the region; as Glubb put it, “Life in the desert is a continuous guerilla warfare,” and this meant striking hard and fast because that was the way of “Bedouin war.” “Not a moderate, but a maximum weight of bombs must be dropped” to maintain the native’s respect for airpower, insisted Flight Lieutenant Mackay. On his return home, General Haldane corroborated this truism about Arabs’ masochistic respect for “force, and force alone,” assuring audiences at the United Service Institute that though he had been “obliged to inflict a very severe lesson on the recalcitrant tribes, they bore me no resentment.” To them, Glubb elaborated, war was a “romantic excitement” whose production of “tragedies, bereavements, widows and orphans” was a “normal way of life,” “natural and inevitable.” Their taste for war was the source of their belief that they were “elites of the human race.” It would almost be a cultural offense *not* to bombard them with all the might of the empire (not least out of respect for the frequently invoked tribal principle of communal responsibility). Arnold Wilson confirmed for the Air Ministry that the problem was one of public perception, that Iraqis were used to a state of constant warfare, expected justice without kid gloves, had no patience with sentimental distinctions between combatants and noncombatants, and viewed air action as entirely “legitimate and proper.” “The natives of a lot of these tribes love fighting for fighting’s sake,” Trenchard assured Parliament. “They have no objection to being killed.” In a place long romanticized as an oasis of a

prelapsarian egalitarianism and liberty, defenders of air control could rest assured that the Bedouin retained their dignity even under bombardment and were not miserable wretches deserving of a condescending pity. Mark Sykes had long before recommended rule by local agents who could “shoot and give an order and never bother natives about cant and nonsense such as the rights of man.” Thus would the “natives” see them as “proper and respectable persons.” The ultramechanical “knight of the air” may have brought chivalry, in the sense of honorable combat between elite warriors, back to an otherwise thoroughly grim and “vulgarised” modern warfare, but this influence, its proponents were careful to elucidate, was “quite distinct from the humanitarian one” which regarded with compassion “those whom chivalry despised.” Thus, Iraqi women and children need not trouble the conscience, for, as the British commander observed, “[sheikhs]... do not seem to resent... that women and children are accidentally killed by bombs.” To them, women and children were “negligible” casualties compared to those of the “really important men,” Lawrence explained, conceding this was “too oriental a mood for us to feel very clearly.” Frightening as such fearlessness ought to have been, it seems instead to have provoked derision, or perhaps comic relief: as air secretary, Samuel Hoare fatuously assured Parliament that bombing of flocks and herds often proved sufficient; indeed, “tribes had felt that form of local operation more severely than if they had dropped bombs on the tribes themselves. (Laughter.)”<sup>19</sup>

Paranoia only confirmed the view that the entire Iraqi population was a latent army easily triggered into hostile action by Britain’s enemies. What was excusable as wartime excesses against the Boche would be always permissible against this population. In 1932, the high commissioner, head of the British administration in nominally independent Iraq, warned against clipping the “claws” of the RAF because “the term ‘civilian population’ has a very different meaning in Iraq from what it has in Europe... The whole of its male population are potential fighters as the tribes are heavily armed.” This was a population at once so orientally backward and so admirably manly and phlegmatic that, to a postwar imperium increasingly in thrall to cultural relativistic notions, all principles of *ius in bello* were irrelevant. Arabia was, in British eyes, especially suited to a type of bombardment that might be morally offensive elsewhere. The austerity of tribal existence, a condition imagined to extend to all Iraqis, rendered even concern about destruction of “property” irrelevant—despite the targeting of livestock, camels, and villages. It is useful to recall here, as a counterpoint, the premise of Lawrence’s guerrilla theory—that Bedouin could neither tactically nor temperamentally sustain casualties. Stereotypes of Arabs were, however, capacious enough to accommodate such contradictions, and British agents’ faith in their intuitive grasp ensured that all pronouncements

on Arab character were sound.<sup>20</sup> Only one officer, Lionel Charlton, chief of staff in Iraq in 1923, seems to have taken the softer view of tribal warfare as a more innocent, bloodless, sportlike style of retribution seriously, and he resigned in outrage against the notion that “an air bomb in Iraq was, more or less, the equivalent of a police truncheon at home.”<sup>21</sup>

With all Iraqis transmuted into belligerents, it became easier to mute alarm about air reports by recourse to euphemism. When Churchill objected to the reporting of casualties under the “comprehensive head of ‘men and women,’”<sup>22</sup> Trenchard, who in general shared Arabist agents’ intuitive bent of mind and disinterest in statistics, insisted that in countries in which combatants and non-combatants and even the sexes could not be distinguished by visual markers, all casualties should be reported in “bulk numbers” without details as to sex or age. Air control and its indiscriminate violence were ideally suited to a place in which indiscriminate violence did not matter, as little in fact distinguished combatants from noncombatants. Casualty counts could legitimately assume that all were combatants without fear of traducing the data. Indeed, data of any kind was so notoriously difficult to find that any amount of scrupulousness in record-keeping seemed excessive. From the Middle East Department, Richard Meinertzhagen assured his colleagues in Iraq, “Bombs dropped on men in the open seldom have much effect beyond fright” and advised dropping the matter of results because aerial observation of casualties was “always misleading.” (It is worth remembering in this connection his prewar experience using bayonets, rifles, machine guns, and fire to eliminate recalcitrant Kikuyu in East Africa.) Even political officers’ failures to observe “results” on the ground were immaterial, for, Meinertzhagen’s colleague Reader Bullard assured, “news as to casualties will drift in from the desert gradually.” This cavalier attitude rendered casualties entirely, well, casual. “If the Civil Commissioner is going on to Mosul,” read a General Headquarters telegram to Wilson, “will he be so kind as to drop a bomb on Batas”—the sort of kindness he apparently never objected to. Striking at a phantom enemy and enjoying the bliss of willful ignorance at the outcome made air control sit more easily in the official mind. Only in Arabia, about which the British had long decided that nothing could ever really be known, did such fecklessness make sense and thus make air control acceptable.<sup>23</sup>

Air control also seemed to fit comfortably in a biblical land. In 1932, when the inhumanity of air control was of some pressing importance at the World Disarmament Conference in Geneva, the high commissioner argued that unlike the outrages inevitably committed by ground troops, “bombing from the air is regarded almost as an act of God to which there is no effective reply but immediate submission.”<sup>24</sup> Lawrence, speaking anonymously as one “who has lived among the Arabs, one whose intimate knowledge of their ways and thoughts

is universally recognized,” explained the “impersonally fateful” nature of air bombing from an Arab’s point of view: “It is not punishment, but a misfortune from heaven striking the community.” It was the “superstition...concerning the ‘god in the air’” that commanded Arabs’ respect, explained a wing commander (their inevitable discovery that it was only a man in the plane making it all the more urgent that the RAF demonstrate its power “with all its might”). Arabia was a biblical place, and the people who lived there *knew* that; they expected periodic calamity and continual news of life and death. Bombardment was to them yet another kind of visitation. Air control played on Arabs’ presumed fatalism, their faith in the incontrovertible “will of God.” Such people could bear random acts of violence in a way that Europeans, coddled by secular notions of justice and human rights, could not. This view underwrote the frequent harping on the importance of not breeding too much familiarity with aircraft, lest the Arabs cease to view them as vehicles of divine retribution.<sup>25</sup>

As a biblical space, Arabia was also a place of elemental clashes between good and evil out of the realm of ordinary, mortal law. The Bedouin “world of violence, bloodshed and war” recalled, for Glubb, England’s forgotten “age of chivalry”—which could itself be traced to the Arab conquest of Spain: they possessed “depths of hatred, reckless bloodshed...lust of plunder of which our lukewarm natures seem no longer capable...deeds of generosity worthy of fairy-tales and acts of treachery of extraordinary baseness.” Their “love of dramatic actions” outweighed “the dictates of reason or the material needs,” even, the General Staff affirmed, overcame their “inherent dislike of getting killed.” In this last bastion of authentic experience, bombardment could be accommodated as yet another vitalizing experience—shared equally by airmen who were resurrecting chivalry even as its death knell was sounded (many Bristol fighters being fitted, incidentally, with Sunbeam’s “Arab” engines). Dr. Miller Maguire, speaking as an “ordinary member of the public,” marveled excitedly at the end of a lecture on air control at the United Service Institute that it was all familiar from Chaucer’s tales about the kings of Tartary whose horses “used to ride in the air” and Milton’s poems about air battles between angels and devils. Bombardment allowed bombers to at once fulfill this medieval atavism and give Arabs what they wanted. No group did more to fulfill this romantic vision of air control than Ibn Saud’s puritanical avant-garde forces, who continually raided into Iraq from Najd, often eluding their patron’s grasp. Gertrude Bell was fiercely proud of “our power to strike back” at the diabolical Ikhwan, who, “with their horrible fanatical appeal to a medieval faith, rouse in me the blackest hatred.” All concerns about cruelty were moot among those “notorious for...cruelty and...inhuman injustices.” Bloodlust made sense in heterocosmic Arabia. It was the way of the place, and, as with intelligence operations, the mantra was “When in Rome...”<sup>26</sup>

These clashes between good and evil transformed the “pacification” project into a series of episodes of cosmic significance. During the rebellion, Leachman, of whose unpopularity we have already read, wrote chillingly of his desire “to see . . . a regular slaughter of the Arabs in the disaffected areas.” His adoring biographer, fellow political officer Norman Bray, describes him living in constant fear of assassination, concluding, “No wonder he . . . reveled in dropping bombs on Arabs concealed in a hollow.” Paranoia and the transposition of real Arabia into the Arabia of myth, the consummate spy-space, made bombing palatable—even to individuals who believed they would revile it any other context. The vindication of air control grew out of long-circulating ideas about Arabia as a place somehow exempt from the this-worldliness that constrained human activity in other parts of the world. There heroes could reach the most exalted heights and villains the profoundest depths; there, as in literature, agents could find escape from the pitiful reality of human suffering into an exalted sphere in which everything possessed a cosmic significance. There, where each soul was free to work out its cosmic destiny, violence was entirely *personal*: Sheikh Dhari, Leachman’s assassin—or “murderer,” as he was styled in British accounts—was the single exception to the general amnesty granted after the rebellion. He was not seen as a member of that uprising, but as someone who had violated the honor between two men; the Iraqi unrest was reconfigured as an episode of medieval battle, in which the mettle of chivalric men was tested and rewarded. In this “supreme crisis,” “every quality [Leachman] possessed, *even his faults*, served the cause of England.”<sup>27</sup>

Ordering bombers was thus entirely consonant with the sensibility of the Arabist agent enchanted with notions of Arabian liberty. A journalist remarked, “It is frequently those officials who are loudest in their demand for complete independence and for the removal of the British forces and advisers who are also the first to cry out for the assistance of British aeroplanes.” The agents loved Arabia for its otherworldly qualities, and it was those very qualities that made Arabia a space fit to bear the equally unearthly destruction wreaked by bombers. Britons considered the moral world of Arabia distinct from their own. From the outset, the intelligence project in Arabia had been infused with a philosophical spirit, which did not depart it at this stage.<sup>28</sup>

The Arabian window of acceptability opened the door to wider uses of aerial bombardment. In 1921, the Air Staff deemed it better, in view of allegations of “barbarity,”

to preserve appearances . . . by still nominally confining bombardment to targets which are strictly military . . . to avoid emphasizing the truth that air warfare has made such restrictions obsolete and impossible.

It may be some time until another war occurs and meanwhile the public may become educated as to the meaning of air power.”

Arabia offered the Air Staff a means of selling the new warfare to the public by exhibiting it in a famously romantic and chivalric place where, it was known, the bourgeois rules lately exposed by the war as utterly bankrupt did not apply anyway. (Significantly, when Iraq’s former air commander, Sir John Salmond, called the question of air control’s humanity a “paradox” in a United Service Institute lecture, the *Times* paraphrased it as “anachronism.”) There, any principle not military devolved into bathos. After all, the Iraqi authorities, the Air Staff pointed out, were among the first to concede the potentialities of aircraft.<sup>29</sup> Thus, in otherworldly Arabia, bombardment became irrevocably part of this world; eventually, British bombs fell frictionlessly all over the world, including Europe. The gruesome relish evident in a 1924 report by the officer commanding Squadron 45 in Iraq is striking in this regard:

The Arab and Kurd . . . now know what real bombing means, in casualties and damage; they now know that within 45 minutes a full sized village . . . can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured by four or five machines which offer them no real target, no opportunity for glory as warriors, no effective means of escape.

Ultimately excised, this sentence appears verbatim in early drafts of an Air Staff report to Parliament. The officer himself later achieved distinction, and, writes David Omissi, “in the ruins of this dying village one can dimly perceive the horrific firestorms of Hamburg and Dresden,” for the officer was Squadron Leader Arthur Harris, head of Bomber Command in World War Two. Harris later traced his faith in the heavy bomber as the only salvation against Germany to his experience in the Middle East. It was in Iraq that he made the first long-range heavy bomber by crudely converting a transport plane and developed night bombing as a means of terrorizing Arabs into thinking airplanes could see them even in the dark. At his side then, as during the war, were Robert Saundby and Ralph Cochrane. Indeed, two and a half times as many British pilots served in Iraq as elsewhere. Air control trained the RAF in bombardment; it was the only significant British experience of bombing before World War Two. The RAF thought it was getting good training for the next war—whatever historians’ assessment of its preparation. Even the British focus on general area bombing (as opposed to the American preoccupation with “precision”)—can be traced to the emphasis on moral effect over accuracy in the Iraqi laboratory. Tellingly, it was under Harris’s wartime influence that Churchill, as

prime minister, warded off periodic pangs of conscience about bombing German cities with faith in the “higher poetic justice” that “those who have loosed these horrors upon mankind will now in their homes and persons feel the shattering stroke of retribution.” It was the Ikhwan all over again, and Europe itself had become the scene of a clash between good and evil—a gradual transposition that dated to the days well before Hitler’s seizure of power, when “fascist” was an epithet hurled against the Saudi government and Britons began to fear that airpower—and technological hubris more generally—would not so much secure the empire as open up the possibility of Britain’s being bombed into a *desert*. The alleged prematurity with which Britons began to fear aerial bombardment in the early 1930s, before any apparent material international development, seems less remarkable when we look, as they did, beyond the European horizon of history to the distant happenings in the deserts of Arabia.<sup>30</sup>

### The Human Face of Air Control?

Ideas about Arabia may have exonerated air control from charges of *inhumanity*, but the regime’s reliance on political officers on the ground, modeled on the veteran agents, was crucial to its projection of an actively humane image. Their supposed intuitive understanding of the place carried within it a claim to an empathetic style of colonial control that supposedly kept the regime from growing distant and impersonal. The theory of moral effect was intended to project a benign vision of air control, in which aircraft were explicitly modeled on the traditional political officer, merely replacing the traditional “prestige of the white man” with the prestige of a machine that took advantage of the “ignorance of the native mind.” Not only were aircraft modeled on these traditional embodiments of British “moral suasion,” but their continued presence on the ground provided the RAF with both scapegoats and a ready antidote, at least in theory, for all its faults of inhumanity.<sup>31</sup>

Initially, some feared that air control might prematurely render traditional political officers obsolete. The community of agents warned against such a development as likely to make the British as distant and hated as the late Turkish rulers of Iraq. They insisted, as seen in chapter 3, on the need for “men who are specially gifted, who have got the feeling of the Middle East in their blood.” Indian officials speaking from long imperial experience likewise warned, “The *deus ex machina* is useful in his place, but is out of place in the day-to-day administration.” While political officers did travel by air to reach their posts, accompany reconnaissances, and participate in bombing runs, the establishment’s

gadflies had little to fear: the RAF quickly realized that it needed the cooperation of political officers on the ground to ascertain just when the desired moral effect had been achieved and avoid unduly prolonging operations. Ground agents were also crucial for coping with the problems of pilot disorientation and visibility failures that continued to plague the theoretically all-seeing regime (although they, too, often remained disoriented and requested aerial tours to better understand the terrain). The importance of swift action without reference to a home department in a region apparently rife with conspiracies also made a fully organized intelligence system on the ground indispensable.<sup>32</sup>

At first, existing political officers seemed likely to fulfill the needs of the civil government, the army, and the air force. During the 1920 insurrection, however, the RAF found itself somewhat constrained by the “reluctance” of these officers “to appear to be alarmist, with the result that their reports were too meagre and too late.” Somewhat paradoxically, the regime’s early excesses were also blamed on political officers’ ignorant and overly enthusiastic requests for bombers (blindly obeyed by airmen inadequately aware of their own “semi-political” role). These problems were remedied by the creation of an RAF Special Service Officer (SSO) organization eventually consisting of a Central Bureau with agents on the outside in charge of the various zones of the country. Pilots, SSOs, and administrative inspectors (as the former political officers were now styled) worked closely together.<sup>33</sup>

The SSOs quickly adopted their predecessors’ tactics and epistemology. Intuitive ability and canny knowledge of local custom were deemed indispensable to acquisition of the information required for bombardment, given the “peculiar mentality” of tribesmen, “who,” Glubb explained, “deemed it a duty to receive and to welcome a guest, although he was mapping their villages with a view to bombing them and told them so.” Immersion became a universal principle of aircraft intelligence in theaters of irregular warfare, where selection of the correct air objective called for information materially different from that used against a “first class power”: “comprehensive and accurate knowledge of the topography, the psychology of the enemy, his customs, characteristics, and industries” *and* the ability to “sift the evidence very thoroughly” for truth. The importance of constant roving, for any type of agent in the Middle East, was etched in stone. As SSO “Akhwan Defence,” Glubb, along with several others, advised pilots to heed the wisdom of their terrestrial counterparts:

There is no golden road to the acquisition of tribal knowledge. The deus ex-machine [*sic*] who descends upon a miserable camp of frightened nomads, and shouts at them for five minutes above the noise of the engine, cannot expect to learn much. Only long hours,

days and weeks of intercourse will make him familiar with natives and without this familiarity, he cannot commence to understand his work.

In 1930, the Air Council formally adopted this principle. The ultimate goal for agents and pilots was, as before, to be able to think like an Arab and imitate his “magical” ability to “divine” knowledge, such as the intentions of raiders, from desert signs, even seemingly “invisible” ones. Major Jarvis marveled at Philby’s prediction of approaching raiders as chief British representative in Amman: “It seems extraordinary that it remained for a British official to notice and identify a strange symbol of lines and half-circles, which to the educated Arabs conveyed nothing, and to forecast that which was shortly to occur.” These agents claimed empathy with, even love for, Arabs as the source of their genius. Immersion enabled them to overcome the near impossibility, as one put it, of a man of one race ever understanding another, and to “interpret what is in [the Arabs’] mind.” Air Intelligence trusted SSOs to accurately “sense impending events” (if not “dig down to the facts,” a task more befitting the SIS). Successful bombardment was often attributed to SSO genius, wireless technology allowing them to communicate swiftly with aircraft—from their mouths to God’s ears. They differed from prewar agents in that their work reflected the war’s expansion of intelligence into the permanent nomadic warfare of peacetime, exemplified by the counter-raiding tactics of Glubb’s Southern Desert Camel Corps, explicitly recalling Lawrence’s wartime adventures (not to mention old-fashioned British naval policing against pirates).<sup>34</sup>

The security that aircraft in turn provided this ground intelligence system was lauded as the source of the regime’s ultimate benevolence: air control, its defenders argued, promoted greater understanding between administrators and Iraqis by enabling political officers to roam without fear. Backed by the skeletal air regime, these men on the spot, in the eyes of the ever-nostalgic former agents in the Colonial Office, were akin to those intrepid Britons of an older, braver age who had served in frontier zones at the bidding of “an adventurous spirit.” The austere air control regime was to them ideally suited to a country that had always been and would always be a sort of vast frontier zone, where one brave Briton would more than make up for the absence of troops. For all its modernity, air control strengthened the feeling that in Arabia they could be as imperialists of old.<sup>35</sup>

Of course, it was also political officers’ untrammelled mobility that ensured the RAF received the intelligence it needed to “[pick] out the right villages and to hit when trouble comes.” By this ironic logic, the RAF’s successful persecution of a village testified to their *intimacy* with people on the ground, without which they would not have been able to strike it accurately. Indeed, the claim to empathy

ultimately underwrote the entire air control system with its authoritative reassurances that bombardment was a tactic that would be respected and expected in this unique land. As late as 1957, RAF Marshal Sir John Slessor defended the regime by pointing to the support of SSOs, who “became so attached to their tribesmen that they sometimes almost ‘went native.’” Well into the 1980s, Glubb insisted, “The basis of our desert control was not force but persuasion and love.” In 1989, a military historian—much-cited, even by U.S. Air Force officers—again vindicated the regime by citing Glubb: “No European was ever closer and more sympathetic to the Arabs than Sir John Glubb.” And then there are the epigraphs from the new millennium that open this chapter.<sup>36</sup>

At the end of the day, the claim to empathy was of course built, literally, on sand. From its Edwardian invention as an intelligence epistemology, it signaled not the recognition of a common humanity but a self-alienating strategy for coping in what was perceived as another physical and moral universe. After the war, aspiring agents, inspired partly by the legends surrounding their predecessors, continued to venture to Arabia to escape the bonds of *too much* civilization, to recover a noble, free, democratic spirit lost to “utilitarian” England. Their effort to gather intelligence in the Middle East began with the same baptismal sensations of moving in a fictional, unreal, biblical, enchanted, and uncanny space. They reached for literature and an elegiac mood to convey the “half-romantic, half-mystic feelings” the landscape aroused. Appreciation for the desert’s strange beauty remained the mark of individuals *estranged* from “normal” civilization. They too found in the desert sublime a remembrance of God, a rekindling of faith far from “the cold blasts of Western doubt” and an opportunity to fulfill the nomadic instinct that was “part of the heritage of our race.” Their travel in the desert was still understood as an escape into the blue, a truant fulfillment of patriotic duty. Glubb knew that “in the desert I was alone. The government was indifferent.” He fashioned himself into an “enthusiastic young man” whom his superiors found “slightly unbalanced,” “conceited,” and often insubordinate. To enter Arabia was still to exit the *customary* world, in both senses of the word, for “the desert is a world in itself.”<sup>37</sup>

The “extraordinary and romantic” world of the RAF in Iraq compounded the feeling of being in a world apart. Its tenuous links to “civilisation” through a miraculous wireless infrastructure, and bruits of Lawrence’s presence in the ranks, only fed its Arabian mystique. If flight over the austere biblical terrain reached new heights of sublimity and divinity, an escape from “the normal things in life” to “a new mysterious world,” it also produced “quite a bad effect upon one’s nerves,” a feeling that “the end of the world had really come,” according to Brooke-Popham. Experienced agents stressed that for new pilots, this “sense of being lost at sea” was a critical “mental factor.” Pilots too grew

skilled at identifying “that air of quiet weariness which comes to those who have been in the desert too long.” They fell prey to “a gentle, nameless terror” that made them go temporarily mad and increasingly “fey” as time passed. This was not a place for empathy but for total psychic breakdown, apparently; without some kind of bracing, Britons risked losing their minds. Emulation of Arabs was intended to enable their survival in this extraterrestrial space but did not produce compassion for the Arab victims of the surreal world of bombardment they actually created by pulling the strings of fate from the sky. Thus did Iraq actually become a place beyond the reach of secular and humanitarian law. It remained beyond the gaze of legality and society, a place agents had long used as a site for recovering an otherwise compromised *individual* sovereignty.<sup>38</sup>

True empathy was officially proscribed for the safety of the regime. Official indignation at the utterances and activities of the alleged “fanatics” among the veteran agents inspired efforts to prevent copycat SSOs from falling into the same pattern. Despite official encouragement of immersion, they were firmly warned against “the inclination to drift into native ways” and were expected to “maintain the standards of European life.” Intelligence officers were to tour continually but strictly “without special predilections for any one of the countries.” The ideal was a staff of agents like the old one, minus their eccentric passion for individual potentates and the grotesque threat of empathy with their colonial subjects. Someone perhaps like Wyndham Deedes, who was eulogized for his detachment, a “withdrawal from the world” by which he entered “the realm of contemplation in which the phenomena of daily existence are only...illusion.” (Such aloofness ultimately proved unsustainable even in his case: it was partly frustration with his isolation that led him to resign as chief secretary in Palestine in 1923 to pursue the life of an ascetic and social worker in East London.) Ultimately, the air control scheme rested on terrorizing the population with an *unfamiliar* technology or, rather, with one just familiar enough to allow the effects of exemplary violence to “sink into the mind of the tribesmen”; real familiarity or, for that matter, empathy would only breed contempt. In the succinct words of one scholar, “The technique of ‘empathy’ remained a method of control”; it underwrote the mandate’s entire dyarchical structure, a highly “exacting” form of control, as Lawrence put it, in which British advisers were entrusted with using their psychic, hypnotic influence to ensure the Iraqi government ran along lines favorable to imperial interests.<sup>39</sup>

### Defending the Regime

In interwar Iraq, an obsession with “grand conspiracy,” as in previous historical moments, was implicated in the creation of a regime founded on terror.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, air control did little to assuage official paranoia about the Middle East. Though it owed its invention to a perception of the entanglement of outside and inside threats, its infrastructural minimalism was premised on the existence of no “outside” threats to the regime; and yet it was hurriedly installed and the exhausted army relieved before this condition had been satisfied. The Air Ministry hastily revised its estimate of the scheme’s defensive powers upward and prepared to face an always imminent invasion that they knew the regime could not withstand—John Salmond later confessed that when the RAF took control in 1922, the situation on Iraq’s borders was “far from that anticipated at the Cairo Conference.” The air control scheme was based on bluff, on keeping the country in check by projecting untold British military power in the lonely flight of a single aircraft, and bluffs are always subject to being called, a potentiality that could only feed paranoia. Most of all, the British were painfully aware that their neighbors’ “system of pin pricks and invasion by insidious methods” was being met by reliance on a scheme “which at best can be described as an experiment.”<sup>41</sup>

While airpower became essential to Britain’s ability to hold on to its new acquisitions in the Middle East, this “Land of the RAF” became equally indispensable to British preeminence in airpower. The RAF relied on its Iraqi bases in order to exist as a service. Early on, Meinertzhagen had asserted:

If ever there was an area where AIR POWER could be exercised to its full extent . . . that area is the Middle East and all our plans for control and defence should be based on AIR POWER. No other country in the world has such a training ground, such opportunities and such a strangle-hold as we have in the Middle East, if we are wise.

One of the reasons for keeping the Middle East was the *space* it provided for developing Britain’s aerial defenses (defenses needed primarily to keep the Middle East). Both his department and the Air Staff realized they could hardly air this factor in public. The Cairo Conference propitiously concluded that two of the scheme’s major advantages—if not primary purposes—were imperial: the opportunity to train and *test* an independent air force and the creation “of an ‘All Red’ military and commercial air route to India.” No other theater allowed combination of training “with work of the ‘productive’ character” going on in Iraq. The Middle East was the ideal and *only* place in which to develop the new mechanical warfare in what was increasingly seen as a postnaval age.<sup>42</sup>

With these imperial advantages at stake, letting go of Iraq—the proclaimed objective of the mandatory relationship—posed an awkward dilemma. Not entirely coincidentally, the theory of moral effect also made it difficult to determine when the Iraqi mandate was ready for full independence. Even apparent

pacification could not license a slackening of air control, whose deterrent effect, experts argued, was the only thing keeping the country from plunging into chaos. On the eve of Iraq's admission to the League of Nations, the Air Ministry argued vigorously against withdrawal on the grounds that the RAF there protected the entire empire from collapse (not to mention preserving access to oil fields and a base for war against Russia). The ministry insisted that, despite new diplomatic agreements, Turkey, Persia, and Russia remained threatening; diminution of imperial forces would reduce "the wholesome awe" that kept these "forces of disorder" in check. This meant that intelligence arrangements also would have to remain intact—they too existed to keep tabs on Iraq's ever-precarious "external relations" and on the "precocious growth of ideas of Nationalism and Independence" likely to emerge were those relations ever settled. Such nationalism, the British foresaw, would inevitably consist in Iraqis intriguing with "different countries externally, and different parties and classes internally" to oust the British.<sup>43</sup>

Withdrawal would, in any case, wreck the strategic air route, force India to strengthen its reserves, and thus cost as much as continuing the regime. It was decided that the RAF should explain to the Iraqi government that if it did not think it could maintain security alone, the British government would agree, "very reluctantly," to leave the RAF in Iraq for some time on condition that Iraq would try to strengthen its forces and stand alone. A considerable advantage of this tack was that Iraq would then presumably bear the cost of maintaining the RAF, allowing the British to further ingratiate themselves by offering financial assistance. Above all, this canard would dispel "the impression . . . that we are anxious to keep the air force in Iraq for Imperial purposes." (To their great annoyance, the Iraqi government nevertheless greeted the offer with suspicion.) In fact, ends and means had become one; the scheme that had enabled control of frontierless Iraq now required permanent retention of Iraq for preservation of the frontierless system of colonial control. Iraq was the "key" to the imperial air route; aside from geopolitical security, it secured the empire emotionally, bringing the cherished dominions closer to "the heart of the empire." Whether it really was the pivot of the world, the arrangements based on that assumption quickly made it so.<sup>44</sup>

Iraq's peculiar geography was therefore pressed before the Permanent Mandates Commission, the League of Nations body in charge of supervising the mandate system, to justify the need to maintain the RAF there even after Iraq joined the league. In a besieged, frontierless country, the RAF would ensure the British could implement their alliance as per the 1930 Anglo-Iraqi treaty. (The commission observed that this would "in some way impair the independence of Iraq," an argument the British official found difficult to

counter.) Technically, the RAF would remain for purposes of *external* defense only, but British officials' conviction that external enemies were always entangled with internal ones ensured they put the widest possible construction on their brief. Ambassador Sir Francis Humphrys in Baghdad affirmed that the success of postindependence Iraq would "largely depend on the moral influence which the RAF will continue to exert, on a people naturally lawless and averse to the payment of taxes." (The difficulty was that, though it was politically impossible to let it be known that aircraft might still be used to maintain internal order, not letting this fact be known might itself cause unrest, given that air control operated, in theory, largely through its moral effect.) Thus, while Iraq was launched on the path to independence, existing arrangements remained intact. Every effort was made to ensure that key elements of Iraqi defense—aircraft, wireless, armored cars, intelligence sources—were not shared with the nascent Iraqi Army. None of this was to be construed as an effort to prevent the growth of Iraqi forces; it was merely a call for a "long institutional period." In the end, the British concession of Iraqi independence in 1932 was confessedly nominal; the Air Staff made it clear that the change would be "more apparent than real." The regime's austerity allowed discreet continuity in these arrangements, for "in countries of this sort . . . the impersonal drone of an aeroplane . . . is not so obtrusive as the constant presence . . . of soldiers." The RAF could occupy and control the entire country without apparently doing so, simply by projecting a silent threat. Squadrons were gradually reduced, but the country was reoccupied during World War Two after Britain quashed Rashid Ali's pro-Axis government. The RAF finally departed during the Iraqi revolution of 1958.<sup>45</sup>

In 1960 (the year the CIA made its first attempt to assassinate the Iraqi president), John Glubb reflected on the ease with which humans justify their actions: Ibn Saud, a benign patriarch, had unleashed the massacring power of the Ikhwan to consolidate his power, all the while "breathing the benevolence and the service of God," and the United States, breathing its own lofty ideals, had dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Neither, he explains, was guilty of hypocrisy, for "the human mind is a surprising mechanism." "Hypocrisy" is indeed useless as an *explanation*, however useful it may be as a description, of the failures of avowedly enlightened regimes. I am endeavoring here to lay bare the "surprising mechanism" of the British official mind which enabled it, with mostly clear conscience on the count of hypocrisy—indeed, with confidence in a consistent paternalism—to invent and implement the world's first air control regime. The "idea of Arabia" circulated by agents over the previous twenty years provided them with a key for evading all charges of hypocrisy and brutality. Though the gulf between airmen and some of their critics may never have

been bridged, enough people were convinced, indeed impressed, for the regime to remain viable for the entire interwar period.<sup>46</sup>

Air policing has been called “the salvation of the Royal Air Force” and “the midwife of modern Iraq”; it saved each from being swallowed into another service and country, respectively. Whatever one feels about Iraq as a nation-state or the air force as a military arm, there is, I think, a more useful reading of air control: it created a space in the air for empire at a time when imperialism was no longer at home in the world. Besides diminishing reliance on tired British and Indian troops (whose employment abroad was inciting ever louder protest in India), it allowed “control without occupation” and, as we shall see, without the approval of public opinion. Similarly, today’s drawdown plans for Iraq include little-discussed plans to replace troops with airpower that could “strike everywhere—and at once,” in the ominous words of a Pentagon consultant. Air control was (and is) a mechanism of control for a region and in a time in which more overt colonial rule was (and is) a political impossibility. This was the moment of covert empire, whose gossamer earthly framework we will turn to next.<sup>47</sup>