

Parting the Desert – The Creation of the Suez Canal by Zachary Karabell. John Murray 2003.

The Suez Canal was a revolutionary concept that was made a reality by the determination of an extraordinary Frenchman called Ferdinand de Lesseps. Its creation was – and probably remains – one of the greatest feats of engineering and human courage in history. Once open it effectively joined the northern and southern seas, most importantly reducing the time and danger for a ship to travel from Western Europe to India and beyond.

Zachary Karabell tells this amazing story with verve and conviction, bringing to life the kings and commoners, pashas and politicians, emirs and engineers that are integral to it in a most engaging way. Ultimately Suez became a project whose sub-text was the enduring rivalry between France and the British Empire, a rivalry which, thanks to Benjamin Disraeli and Lionel Rothschild, the latter convincingly won.

The ultimate irony of this great project is that it has most recently been a focus of conflict both political and military, and has now been almost totally superseded by the invention of the super-tanker which finds the old route – round the Cape – as fast and cost effective as navigating the canal.

Karabell's book is a moving tribute to human endeavour and vision, as well as an eloquent statement of the way in which the great projects of yesteryear so easily become the out-moded white elephants of today.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh