

Sowing the Wind – The Seeds of Conflict in the Middle East
by John Keay. John Murray, 2003.

Those who know their Bible will find a clue to the content of this superb new book in its title. John Keay, in *Sowing the Wind*, has written a detailed and fascinating history of colonial mismanagement and interference in the Middle East, most especially by France and the British Empire, over the past century, at the door of whom much of the mess that blights the region today must be laid.

This is much more than a straightforward history however, for Keay's narrative is liberally sprinkled with a cast of characters that only real life could have invented. Soldiers and adventurers, eccentrics – of both sexes – and administrators, businessmen and scholars, Arabists and Zionists.

Keay writes about a very serious topic with commendable humour, enabling the reader to assimilate complicated series of events and interplays between individuals with a light touch that engages and draws one in to the unfolding story. The attitudes evinced by the colonizers towards the Arabs may be summed up by the words in an article from the 1930s whose author said that every Arabic word has five meanings: '1, the original meaning; 2, the opposite of the original meaning; 3, something poetical and nothing to do with the first two; 4, something concerned with a camel; 5, something too obscene to be translated'.

Neither the British nor the French understood or respected the Arabs, and the temptation when they revolted against their governors was to put them down with a brutality that, in the case of the French, makes the high moral tone they adopted over the 2003 Gulf War look even more hypocritical than it already was. Against assumptions of British superiority in this regard needs to be weighed the consideration by Churchill in the 1920s of using chemical weapons against the Kurds.

Into this already combustible mix were thrown Jewish immigrants and the Zionist cause, with neither of which the British knew how to deal. Keay's chapter on Palestine in the 1910s and 20s, *Stranger than History*, is especially fine, and among others contains a quote of the gem by Philip Graves, then Palestine correspondent of the Times, who stated that describing Palestine as 'an Arab province no larger than Wales' was like calling the Koh-i-Noor diamond 'a piece of crystallized carbon about the size of a pigeon's egg' !.

Anyone seeking to gain a greater understanding of why the Moslem world so mistrusts the West, why the relationship with Israel is so complex, and why the 21st century still shows a troubled Middle East whose issues seem no where near a satisfactory , needs to read this book.

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