

Last Chance – The Middle East in the Balance by David Gardner.
I.B. Tauris 2009.

David Gardner is the Chief Leader Writer for the FT and for four years in the 1990s was that august paper's Middle East Editor, so he writes of affairs in that benighted region with both authority and passion.

Last Chance, as its title suggests, is Gardner's magisterial survey of recent Middle Eastern history, and of the several imbroglios with global ramifications in which the Western nations have intimately, and usually disastrously, involved themselves.

The book is divided into eight chapters: The Arab Political Jungle, The Despot in his Labyrinth, The Janus of Islamic Revivalism, The Time of the Shia, Arabia Infelix, Getting Away with Murder?, A Naked, Poor, Mangled Peace and Pax Arabica: the Middle East and the West.

Many themes emerge from this book, all of them covered elsewhere by other journalists and/or scholars of Islam/Judaism/Israel/Arabia etc., etc., but David Gardner achieves a rare feat in a crowded market by bringing an edge to his own writing, and a power to his opinions which make this book stand out from among the rest and clamour to be read by all those capable of taking a dispassionate view of a region that inspires too much passion, and, as the Bible memorably put it of the land of Canaan, 'consumes its inhabitants'.

Gardner is fair with his brickbats and his praise, but behind everything hangs the spectre of America's disastrously lop-sided engagement with the region, the effect of the hypocrisy of its policies and its support for some at the expense of others, and the intractable and insoluble dispute between Judaism and Islam, and Israel and the Palestinians.

You conclude the book well-informed but depressed and anxious, for the prognostications are very poor, and the likelihood of conflagration, through which all will suffer in the region and in the world at large is very great.

Anyone who cares about the Middle East, or who wishes to be informed in a fair and balanced way, should read Last Chance.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh