

## The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj. Merchants, Rulers and British in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf

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**Reviewer:** Nelida Fuccaro

*The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj* analyses the infrastructure of British informal empire in the Persian Gulf in the context of the different types of rule exercised by the Government of India in Asia and East Africa in the 19th century. Ambitious in scope and geographical breadth, this book is also very detailed and painstakingly researched using as case studies the Gulf political residency of Bushehr and the native agency of Bahrain, the latter located in what was known in the 19th century as eastern Arabia, a strip of coastline which extended from Kuwait to Muscat in Oman. In contrasting modes of imperial governance in the peripheries of British India, Onley compares the Persian Gulf with the patchwork of princely states which surrounded Britain's colonial possessions in the heart of the Indian sub-continent. The author's main argument is that there were striking similarities between the management of the protected states of India and of those of the Arabian coast. As Lord Curzon, then Viceroy of India, remarked in 1903, '[Muscat] is as much a Native State of the Indian Empire as Lus Beyla or Kelat [in princely India], and far more so than Nepal or Afghanistan' (p. 217).

By focusing on the Gulf residency and on the native agency system this study adds to the literature which has advocated a reinterpretation of the foundations of British imperialism in Asia since the 1970s. It draws on Ronald Robinson's seminal theory of collaboration which places emphasis on the indigenous foundations of European imperialism. In this book Onley sets out to demonstrate that the Persian Gulf was administered along lines similar to those of Britain's Indian Empire which was 'run by Indians for Britons' (p. 73). And he provides ample evidence to this effect. In Appendix A to the study, for instance, we learn with an abundance of detail that the Gulf Residency of Bushehr and its dependencies in Bahrain, Muscat and Sharjah (among others) were staffed overwhelmingly by locals. Merchants based in the regional ports, the centres of British imperial influence, acted as native agents following a practice adopted by the East India Company in the Indian sub-continent before the 1820s. At the onset of the agency system in the Gulf, Hindus, Christians and Jews were the preferred candidates to fill in the posts. As British interest in the region became more pronounced after the 1830s, Muslim merchants (both Arab and Persian) gradually took over on the grounds of their religious affinity with the local rulers of tribal descent. Their seemingly more intimate knowledge of indigenous customs was a further bonus which increased their importance in the eyes of the Government of India.

The section dealing with early British agents (pp. 83–91) makes a fascinating reading, particularly the episode involving the Bushehr Resident Nicholas Hankey Smith. His refusal to hand over the British flag to his Indian Muslim successor Mahdi Ali Khan in 1798 highlights the racial and religious prejudices which pervaded the Indian Political Service and the internal friction created by such policies. Onley attributes the gradual demise of the Gulf native agency system in the 1890s and the posting of officers from the Indian Political Service to a number of factors: Ottoman expansion in Eastern Arabia, the increasing conflict between trade and politics which negatively affected the position of native agents and the arms trade which supplied weapons to rebels in the north-western frontier of British India. By the mid-1880s this trade had become a major bone of contention between the native agent Muhammad Rahim, the ruler of Bahrain and the British resident. Ironically, as pointed out by Onley, British firms seem to have been the main suppliers of weapons creating a peculiar conflict of interest with the Government of India (pp. 196–7)

Onley's approach to the Persian Gulf as an imperial frontier of British India unequivocally challenges inward-looking perspectives on Gulf history representing a new and exciting departure in the historiography of the region. Previously, historians have studied British influence more or less exclusively in order to explain the survival of ruling families and principalities well into the 20th century. In other words, their focus has been the military and political protection offered by the Government of India to the tribal rulers of the Arab coast. The late Rosemarie Said Zahlan famously wrote that 'the British connection added an important element to the sovereignty of the states and their rulers'.<sup>(1)</sup> In an equally stimulating fashion this book prompts the reader to re-think the historical roots of the contemporary political geography of the region which is usually considered the preserve of Middle Eastern specialists. The book cover brilliantly illustrates these novel approaches to the Gulf world adopted in Onley's study. Featuring a section of the Howard Vincent Map of the British Empire centring on the Arabian Sea and the Gulf waters it exposes the geographical substance of the political and diplomatic networks which linked the Persian Gulf (and Arabian Peninsula) to India while unveiling the artificial nature of the boundaries drawn by academic conventions. To a great extent the Gulf's Middle East connection is the brainchild of a retrospective reading of regional history which is rooted in the 'Arabisation' of politics and society which occurred with the advent of oil and modernity after the Second World War. Before oil the Gulf ports had a markedly cosmopolitan outlook which resembled that of their British native agencies which Onley depicts as 'multinational collaborative organisations' (p. 219).

In order to explain the 'Indianisation' of the Gulf in the 19th century the author takes the rivalry between the Great Powers for Asian hegemony as his point of departure, a rivalry which played so large a role in defining the global contours of the British Empire drawn in the Howard Vincent map. As the 'gateway to India' the Persian Gulf featured prominently in the Great Game and in the Eastern Question, the two major platforms of European diplomatic and military confrontation in western Asia. Throughout the 19th century Russian military and political encroachment in Iran and the turbulent politics of Afghanistan on the north western frontier of British India increased the importance of the Persian Gulf, and of the Iranian coast in particular, as the bulwark against Russian expansion. At the same time, British anxiety over the control of areas lying to the east of the Red Sea was increased after Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 which gave impetus to Anglo-French disputes over the control of the Ottoman Empire. By the 1880s, when the Ottoman armies started to make inroads into Eastern Arabia from Basra and Baghdad, the Arab coast gained further prominence in the Eastern Question, prompting the Government of India to stipulate exclusive protection agreements with a handful of local rulers.

The critical apparatus of the study is included in the first three chapters of the book which *inter alia* discuss the origins and expansion of the residency and native agency systems of British India (as far west as British Somaliland in East Africa) and the history of the Indian Political Service. Onley draws on theories of imperialism on the one hand, and on the rich literature on British India in the age of empire on the other. His discussion of intelligence and mediation, which he identifies as the two principal functions of native agencies across India and the Gulf, is informed by Bayly's *Empire and Information* <sup>(2)</sup>, Robinson's theory of collaboration <sup>(3)</sup> and Fisher's *Indirect Rule in India*.<sup>(4)</sup> The last three chapters, which formed the core of

the author's doctoral dissertation, analyse the native agency of Bahrain from around 1816 until 1900. They discuss in detail its finances and organisation, and the agents' duties and their biographies which are meticulously arranged in chronological order in chapter five according to their tenure of office.

Onley's book is a remarkable display of bibliographical erudition and knowledge of the subject matter. The glossaries, appendices and bibliographies which take up approximately one-third of the study are evidence of an almost encyclopaedic endeavour which will be extremely useful to any scholars wishing to study informal empire in the Persian Gulf and beyond. For instance, consider the topical structure of the bibliographies listing both primary and secondary sources. They range from autobiographies of British officials organised by region and studies of British imperialism to merchants in the Gulf and Asia. Similarly, the appendices contain a wealth of detail hitherto buried in the British archives and in the dusty ledgers of the private collections of Bahrain's native agents which the author has perused extensively.

This study is clearly brilliantly researched. However, it is not always incisively argued or well organised. The level of detail it includes is homage to the historian's craft, a testimony of the skills and minutiae of this metier. Yet the wealth of detail sometimes constrains the narrative flow, and it does not help the reader to relate the evidence to the overall argument. This study is also overladen with a dense historiographical apparatus reflecting its bibliographical spread (however commendable an effort in itself). In parts the reader is left to wonder whether it would have been advisable to produce few articles on the side, which would have avoided the lengthy literature reviews in the text. See, for example, the detailed analysis of the historical accounts of the Gulf Residency and native agencies written by British civil servants, travellers and historians (pp. 48–52). A firmer editorial hand would have been welcome.

There are also some organisational problems which reflect upon the scholarly apparatus of the study. The introduction is relatively short and although it is quite evocative it should have fleshed out more organically conceptual issues such as imperialism, collaboration and mediation as a way to introduce the reader to the following chapters. Instead these issues are tackled in some detail in chapters two and three which are quite a dense read. In chapter three British India's Native Agency System should perhaps have been painted in broader strokes following a more succinct and engaging thematic rubric. This chapter is some 40 pages long and divided into 12 sections inclusive of tables. In chapter two the section 'British Native Agency in Bahrain c.1816–1900' effectively deals only with the early years of the Agency and would feature more appropriately in part II. Issues of organisation and synthesis (the latter also evident in some passages in the later chapters) seem to be symptomatic of the author's too close reliance on his doctoral dissertation which forms the basis of this study.

Informal empire comes alive in chapters four to six which are devoted to Bahrain. These pages depict an imperial frontier populated by a multitude of shrewd Arab and Persian native agents, their powerful merchant families and the often physically distant British residents based on the Iranian coast. Evidence of the judicial duties exercised by native agents is particularly instructive on the crucial connection between trade and politics which underscored British penetration in the region throughout the 19th century. As native agents started to adjudicate commercial cases involving British subjects and dependants after 1861, they became the protectors of imperial interests par excellence, as well as important arbiters in local politics. In these chapters some context on Bahrain which might have been useful for non-Gulf specialists is left unexplained. This is particularly the case of the relationship between merchants and the ruling family which underscored the development of the port economy of the islands and the foundation of the political structures of the principality. This relationship was an integral part of the power triangle which bound merchants and rulers to the handful of British Indian officials who served in the Bushehr residency throughout the 19th century. By providing evidence on merchants as intermediaries between the Gulf residency and the rulers of Bahrain, this study offers crucial insights into their role as state makers. That previous studies have underestimated this role is the result of the often cursory reading of the literature on the British Empire which has informed them, a reading which Onley's study clearly takes to new depths.

This is a book of substance. Despite a number of limitations its approach is original and timely and likely to

inspire other scholars in the field of regional and imperial history. For Gulf and Middle Eastern historians its main achievement is to 'bring indigenous agency back in' as a way of explaining the workings of the British Indian Empire in a regional context. For imperial historians this book will hopefully expand the geographical horizons of British India by focusing their attention on the relevance of its peripheries.

## Notes

1. Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman* (2nd edn., Reading, 1998), p. 20.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Christopher Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge, 1996).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Ronald E. Robinson, 'Non-European foundations of European imperialism: sketch for a theory of collaboration', in *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism*, ed. Roger Owen and B. Sutcliffe (London, 1972), pp. 117–42.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Michael Fisher, *Indirect Rule in India: Residents and the Residency System, 1764-1857* (Oxford, 1991).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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