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Prologue: Britain in Iraq

As British troops entered Basra in April 2003, few people in Britain realised that this was not the first time. Nearly ninety years earlier, in November 1914, a force of 5000 men had captured the city, at a cost of 489 casualties.¹ The circumstances were very different, of course. The world in which that occupation took place has virtually disappeared. In 2003 Britain acted as a junior partner of the US in the full glare of world publicity; in 1914 Britain acted alone, and the occupation of Basra was an obscure sideshow in a much wider conflict. The Raj in India was still at the heart of Britain's global interests, and Iraq mattered because of its place in communications with India. For that reason the campaign was organised from Bombay using mostly Indian troops. The adversary in Basra was not 'Iraqi' or Arab, but the forces of the Ottoman Empire. In fact, Iraq did not yet exist. The British name for it – Mesopotamia – was also a fiction: the country was administered by the Turks as three free-standing provinces, of which Basra was one. So the occupation of 1914 hardly prefigured that of 2003. But the aftermath of 1914 is highly relevant to understanding the situation faced by the Anglo-American coalition from 2003 onwards. Basra was placed under military administration, while British forces gradually advanced northwards, taking Baghdad in 1917. At the end of the war, Britain was the obvious choice to take over the country from the defeated Turks. But instead of exercising complete sovereignty Britain administered Iraq as a Mandate of the League of Nations, and was in theory accountable to the new body. The Mandate continued until 1934, after which Britain

withdrew to a position of informal influence, which ended only with the overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958.

That period provides food for thought in two ways. First, it directs attention to the intentions of the occupiers. During the 1920s British rule in Iraq was presented as an experiment in democratic state-building; when self-interest was acknowledged, it focused on the security of communications with India (at a time when the air route from Britain was being developed). What was left unstated was the rapidly growing significance of Iraq as an oil producer. By the First World War oil was the preferred fuel for the Royal Navy, and it was in short supply. At the time when Britain took over in Iraq, no oil had actually been found, but it was known to exist in large quantities in the north of the country. Well before drilling began around Kirkuk in 1927, oil was central to British interests in Iraq. As Marian Kent has put it, 'by 1920 Mesopotamian oil, still commercially as hypothetical as ever, had come to occupy a major place in British diplomatic and military concerns in the Middle East'.² Little of that concern was reflected in public statements about the Mandate.

The second point concerns Iraqi resistance. The British relied primarily on the minority Sunni community to staff the administration. The Shiites were accordingly the backbone of the resistance, though the participation of Sunnis and Kurds belies the notion that this was no more than a sectarian conflict. The rebellion of 1920 cost about 6000 Arab and 500 British and Indian lives: it was sufficiently serious to prompt the British to abandon direct rule, and instead to govern through a client regime. But the appointment of King Faisal (also a Sunni) in 1921 did not fundamentally alter the situation, since he was widely viewed as a British stooge. Major revolts occurred in 1923 and 1931, involving both Arabs and Kurds. The difference was that now the British relied less on ground troops, and more on aerial bombing. The RAF became a regular arm of the administration, especially to extract taxes from recalcitrant communities. After a visit to the country in 1925, the Colonial Secretary commented, 'If the writ of King Faisal runs effectively through his kingdom, it is entirely due to British aeroplanes. . . . If the aeroplanes were removed tomorrow, the whole structure would inevitably fall to pieces'.³

Calling to mind this history now is open to the objection that it consigns Iraq to a repetitive cycle from which there can be no

escape because it is pre-ordained. That view can only be sustained if the impact of present-day contingencies is set aside. The point of these precedents is rather to broaden awareness of the possible – or likely – outcomes of external intervention in Iraq today. The occupation may or may not be driven by the politics of oil, but knowing something of the Mandate era might induce a healthy scepticism about official statements to the contrary. Of specific relevance to the British would be an enquiry into how their reception by the population of Basra today may be conditioned by their previous experience of conquest and colonial administration. Most critical of all, the naive expectations about the stability of post-Saddam Iraq might have been tempered by some awareness of the record of the Mandate. The difficulties of Faisal's regime in establishing its authority while visibly relying on the military support of an occupying power should have suggested, at the very least, a cautious estimation of the prospects for stable and secure administration once the war was over.

This interpretation of the British Mandate in Iraq can be found in a number of histories published since the 1970s – notably in the work of Peter Sluglett.⁴ But none of it was in the public domain in Britain during the run-up to war in 2002–3. The mounting sense of crisis produced an immense volume of press comment. Almost all of it either expanded on the horrors perpetrated by Saddam, or speculated about the motives of the Bush administration. For most analysts, the relevant time-depth extended no further back than the first Gulf War in 1991. The major exception was the repeated reference to the era of appeasement in the 1930s: Saddam was widely compared to Adolf Hitler, as an aggressive dictator whose ambitions must be nipped in the bud before his arsenal grew any bigger. Conversely, several commentators who advocated restraint relied on the lesson of Eden's impetuous attack on Nasser during the Suez crisis of 1956. These were rhetorical, moralising responses, which rode roughshod over yawning differences of context, and they further distracted the public from the perspectives that could be learned from the earlier history of Iraq itself.⁵

The almost exclusive focus of the press in 2003 on these imagined 'parallels' is telling evidence of the impoverishment of historical awareness in our society. Faced with the prospect of war in a foreign country about which they knew little, the British public should have

been equipped with the relevant historical material, presented with due respect for the limits of applied history. Some blame must be attached to the editorial priorities of press and television. But the problem goes deeper. History education in its broadest sense is in a state of crisis. History teaching in schools is designed to accommodate as many different demands on content as possible, at the expense of conveying what historical perspective means, and how it might usefully be applied to current issues. At the same time, professional historians are strangely reluctant to adopt the role of expert. If they reach out to the public, it is usually to popularise academic history of a conventional kind; and most historians do not do even that, preferring to address only their academic peers. The consequence is a significant democratic deficit. Active participation in our political culture depends on many attributes, but critical knowledge is consistently downplayed in current debates about citizenship. This book explains how historical reasoning can be applied to the present, why the expertise of historians is needed in the public sphere, and why our democracy would be the stronger for it.

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