

**Peter Clark.** *Emirates Diaries: From Sheikhs to Shakespeare*. Medina Publishing, Surbiton, Surrey, 2017, pp. 271. Map. Illust. Index. Pb. £9.95. ISBN 9 7819 1148 7098

Although this work follows Peter Clark's already published volume of diaries about his posting in Damascus (reviewed in *Asian Affairs* in March 2017), it actually covers an earlier period, namely his tour as British Council Director in Abu Dhabi from 1988 to 1992.

It is a measure of the impact Peter made in the United Arab Emirates that the foreword to his book is by the UAE Minister of Culture, Shaikh Nahyan bin Mubarak, who, as Chancellor of the UAE University, became one of Peter's key contacts in his efforts to add substance to bilateral cultural relations.

As Peter Clark admits in his Introduction, he was initially reluctant to go to the UAE, which he regarded as "brash and modern ... – an artificial creation grafted onto the Arabian Peninsula". However, within a couple of months of arriving, he was able to pronounce himself "quite content here", in what he acknowledged to be a "fascinating posting". By this time he had already met a wide range of official contacts, as well as prominent figures in culture and the arts, including Dubai author Mohammed al-Murr, whose short stories he was later to translate.

To one familiar with the country in the 1980s, it is nostalgic to read the accounts of meetings with some of the more memorable characters of the local and British expatriate communities. The author's fascination with personalities and their connections – well-suited to a society that sets such store by personal relationships – adds to the entertainment value. Even British characters are given the treatment: on meeting the then British Ambassador to Yemen, Peter notes that his godmother was married to a former Legal Secretary in the Sudan in 1899!

Peter quickly established a reputation. The British Ambassador reported people commenting "he's interested in Arabic"; and his links with the British explorer Wilfred Thesiger soon led to a request from the Ruler to invite the latter to Abu Dhabi. With characteristic entrepreneurship, he set about bidding for the Prince of Wales (Vice-Patron of the British Council) to open the Council's new office in the inland oasis city of Al-Ain during a forthcoming visit to the Emirates.

Despite discouraging noises from his British Council bosses about promoting cultural activities other than English-language teaching (on the grounds that these would benefit only the large expatriate element of the UAE population), Peter proceeded to put considerable effort into such activities. As he put it to a representative from BP, the Council was "investing in influence" (for example, 16 students from the UAE University's faculty of engineering had been to Britain the previous year).

Peter Clark makes no secret of what he sees as the lack of support from the British Council hierarchy back home. Almost immediately after the success of his input into the Prince of Wales's visit, he received a performance assessment describing him as "not up to the demands of the job"! His typical reaction was to plunge into his next initiative, an exhibition of Wilfred Thesiger's photographs in the UAE: a signal success patronized by the Ruler himself.

Like others living in the region at the time (including this reviewer), the British Council family in the UAE were closely affected by the tensions following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. As an ally of Kuwait in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the UAE fretted about becoming a target for Iraqi attacks – and the nervousness was transmitted to the large expatriate British community. The war, when it finally came in January 1991, seems almost to have been an anti-climax, although the author acknowledges serious concern about the safety of the many British Council staff and their dependants.

With the end of the Gulf War, normal activity resumed, with Peter undertaking new initiatives aimed at thickening up the relationship. Once again, he found himself at odds with his line manager about Council policy towards the UAE, leading him to despair at the "bunch of inadequates" in charge of the organization. The irony was that by this time virtually all the Council's operating budget in the UAE was covered by local revenue earned from English teaching and other activities, mainly thanks to Peter's energetic fund-raising efforts.

As with his excellent earlier volume of Damascus diaries, Peter Clark writes with a light touch, with considerable frankness and enjoyable flashes of humour: discussing traffic jams in Sussex with the Ruler of Fujairah (a former student at Eastbourne); the T-shirt spotted during the Iraq crisis "Visit Iraq before Iraq visits you"; and much more. While

particularly entertaining a read for one familiar with the Emirates in that era, it will also appeal to the general reader as an enjoyable set of insights into a country and a period hitherto slimly covered by English-speaking writers. It is easy to share Peter's delight at the eventual news of his posting to Syria – as it turned out, another rich seam of material for his fertile pen.

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