

## Intelligence in Public Media

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### **Captain Shakespear: Desert Exploration, Arabian Intrigue and the Rise of Ibn Sa'ud**

Alan Dillon (Medina Publishing, 2019), 297 pages, photographs, index.

**Reviewed by Daniel P. King, F.R.G.S.**

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*It is a great game, and you are the man for it, no doubt. . . . You are not afraid of danger? Well, in this job you would not be fighting with an army around you, but alone. You are fond of tackling difficulties? Well, I will give you a task which will try all your powers. Have you anything to say?*

*. . . There is a dry wind blowing through the East, and the parched grasses wait the spark. And the wind is blowing towards the Indian border. Whence comes that wind, think you?*

Thus does Sir Walter Bullivant, head of British intelligence, instruct Richard Hannay, the hero of John Buchan's *Greenmantle*, in a British attempt to head off the forces of bolshevism in the Middle East of 1916.<sup>a</sup> British intelligence, perhaps the best in the world at that time, had been fighting an intelligence battle over dominance in the East since 1837. The intrigue and confrontation among Britain, Russia, and China lasted into the 20th century. This lonely and dangerous game involved some famous—T.E. Lawrence—as well as some unremembered: Col. Percy Etherton, Sir Walter Malleison, Col. F.M. Bailey, and Capt. William Henry Irvine Shakespear.

Captain Shakespear died more than 100 years ago while photographing a battle between rival Saudi armies. He was last seen carrying his camera to higher ground to capture battle scenes between 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Abdul Rahman ibn Faisal ibn Turki ibn Abdullah ibn Muhammad al Sa'ud, known as Ibn Sa'ud in the West) and his rival contender for Najd, al Rashid. His body was found several days later by his aide, with three gunshot wounds. Dying young at 36, he made his mark: explorer, early photographer of Arab leaders and scenes, including the first known photo of King 'Abd al-'Aziz; mapper of hundreds of miles of uncharted northern Arabia; and notably, writing the first treaty between Britain and Ibn Sa'ud, the earliest recognition of Saudi rule in Arabia.

Shakespear was born in Bombay, India, on October 29, 1878. He grew up speaking both English and Punjabi.

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a. John Buchan, *Greenmantle* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1916).

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After graduating in 1897 from Sandhurst, the Royal Military College, he served in the Devonshire Regiment and the Bengal Lancers of the Indian Army. He became fluent in Urdu, Pushtu, Farsi, and Arabic. Returning to Bombay he became an assistant district officer charged with leading a rat-extermination program that ended a plague outbreak that had killed more than a half-million people. He was noticed by the viceroy, who transferred him to the Indian Political Department, which also oversaw British interests in Persia and the Arab world. He served as consul in Bandar Abbas, on the Strait of Hormuz, becoming at age 25, the youngest consul in the Indian administration.

At this time, he became interested in photography, buying himself a pocket-sized Houghton Ensignette, which had been introduced in 1909. He used this camera to take the bulk of his photographs. He also acquired a No. 1 Panoram Kodak, the most portable panoramic camera of its day. He developed his own films using a Kodak developing tank inside his tent—an arduous task considering the high temperatures, dust and sand, and scarcity of clean, cool water needed for the cellulose-nitrate films of the day. His photographs and field notes are in the archives of the Royal Geographical Society in London.

In 1907, he returned to England for his first leave and then traveled through Persia and Turkey in his new eight-horsepower, single-cylinder Rover motorcar that he had purchased in Karachi. Heading back to the Middle East, he drove his car to his new assignment in Kuwait. He enjoyed falconry and acquired a pack of Saluki sighthounds. Unlike Lawrence of Arabia, he wore his military uniform and pith helmet, only resorting to Arab garb when fearful of attack from Turkish forces or hostile tribesmen. His spare time was spent making field notes, mapping, and taking photographs. He was an accomplished rider of camels and horses and reputedly an expert marksman with a revolver.

He first met 'Abd al-'Aziz following a 1,000-mile horse ride south of Kuwait, and his record of this leader

was the first by a European. Shakespear described him as a “fair, handsome man, considerably above average Arab height with a particularly frank and open face, and after initial reserve . . . of genial and very courteous manner.” ‘Abd al-‘Aziz was evidently impressed by Shakespear’s knowledge of the desert and his grasp of Najdi Arabic; “He offered me a welcome should I ever contemplate a tour so far afield as Riyadh.”<sup>a</sup>

After ‘Abd al-‘Aziz forced the Turks out of al-Hasa and attained control of the eastern gulf, the British took him seriously and treaty negotiations took place at Shakespear’s next meeting with him. Returning to Kuwait, Shakespear planned his next expedition across the Arabian Peninsula. In a note to his immediate superior, Sir Percy Cox, he described his plans to collect mapping and survey details. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz greeted him as he rode into Riyadh and after three days, moved northwest, crossing the Nafud desert to al-Jawf where he met the leader of ‘Anaiza confederation and ally of ‘Abd al-‘Aziz. After 111 days, he reached Cairo, along the way exchanging letters with ‘Abd al-‘Aziz and advising the British foreign office that ‘Abd al-‘Aziz would eventually lead an independent Arabia. His data and surveys provided the British War Office with invaluable information useful for the coming world conflict. The Foreign Office, however, disbelieved his opinion that the Turks were doomed in Arabia.

With the beginning of World War I, Shakespear returned to Kuwait. Britain was now convinced that ‘Abd al-‘Aziz was the key in confronting the Turks in Arabia. They needed Shakespear’s help gaining ‘Abd al-‘Aziz’s cooperation to drive the Turks from Basra. This could be accomplished by negotiating a treaty with the king that would recognize him as ruler of Najd. Shakespear found ‘Abd al-‘Aziz near Majma’ah and stayed with him as they moved northward toward Jarab with ‘Abd al-‘Aziz’s army of several thousand men, intending to confront the army of Al Rashid in a contest for Najd. Shakespear began negotiation of a treaty. The resulting battle was indecisive.

While he lost his political struggle, he foresaw Ibn Sa’ud becoming the ruler of Arabia. Sir John Glubb

later wrote: “When I was on a mission in 1928 to ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, I heard him say with emphasis that Captain Shakespear was the greatest Englishman he had ever known.”<sup>b</sup> In time, his accomplishments were superseded by other Middle East luminaries such as T.E. Lawrence, Gertrude Bell, and Harry St. John Bridger Philby, each contributors to the British Empire’s expansion.

Then, as now, Middle East diplomacy depended largely on personal connections. Britain’s interest settled on expanding its colonial ambitions and countering Ottoman Turkey. The shortsightedness of British political leadership to recognize the rising power in Arabia led Shakespear to defy explicit orders not to meet with Ibn Sa’ud in 1913. Priorities however changed with the onset of WWI, and Shakespear was dispatched to negotiate a treaty with Ibn Sa’ud. He met with Ibn Sa’ud on December 31, 1914, and remained with Ibn Sa’ud’s Bedouin army, meeting his fate 24 days later at Jarab.

That day, conspicuous in his army uniform and pith helmet, Shakespear refused ‘Abd al-‘Aziz’s plea to wear Arab dress. Taking his camera, he sought out some higher ground near a field artillery position. There, according to the gunner, he was killed by enemy small arms fire.

Alan Dillon is the second author to chronicle the life and exploits of the barely remembered, but mightily accomplished, diplomat and explorer. (The first was H.V.F. Winstone in *Captain Shakespear: A Portrait*, London, 1976.) A former diplomat in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Dillon served in Afghanistan, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, Saudi Arabia, and Oman. His knowledge of the history and geopolitics of the Middle East is extensive and incisive. He understands the Arab mind and brings this knowledge into perspective in this thought-provoking analysis of Captain Shakespear and the British experience. Understanding history is vital in assessing the role of the West in this vital area of the world today. Scholars and diplomats would be well-served by a careful and serious reading of Dillon’s book.



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a. Peter Harrigan, “Captain Shakespear,” *Saudi Aramco World* 53, no. 5 (September/October, 2002): 12–23.

b. H.V.F. Winstone, *Captain Shakespear: A Portrait* (Jonathan Cape, 1976).