BRITAIN AND YEMEN: THE END OF BRITISH RULE IN SOUTH ARABIA THROUGH THE EYES OF A YOUNG POLITICAL OFFICER

Thanos Petouris

To cite this article: Thanos Petouris (2018) BRITAIN AND YEMEN: THE END OF BRITISH RULE IN SOUTH ARABIA THROUGH THE EYES OF A YOUNG POLITICAL OFFICER, Asian Affairs, 49:1, 56-81, DOI: 10.1080/03068374.2018.1419013

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2018.1419013

Published online: 15 Feb 2018.
BRITAIN AND YEMEN: THE END OF BRITISH RULE IN SOUTH ARABIA THROUGH THE EYES OF A YOUNG POLITICAL OFFICER

THANOS PETOURIS

Thanos Petouris, a member of the Society, is researching the nationalist, anti-colonial movement in Aden and the Protectorate of South Arabia and the subsequent decolonisation process from British rule in the years 1937–67. He lived and worked in Aden intermittently for two years during 2005–10. Email: agpetouris@gmail.com.

Introduction

November 2017 marked the 50th anniversary of the British withdrawal from the Colony of Aden and the Protectorate of South Arabia. The evacuation of the last British soldiers and the British High Commissioner Sir Humphrey Trevelyan, accompanied by the tunes of ‘Fings Ain’t Wot They Used T’Be’, signified the culmination of five years of British military operations against South Yemeni revolutionaries. They were represented by the two main nationalist organisations: the Marxist National Liberation Front (NLF) and the Nasserite Front for the Liberation of South Yemen (FLOSY). And although the armed struggle officially started on 14 October 1963 with the declaration of the Aden Emergency, both the Colony and the Protectorate had already experienced at least a decade of anti-British political activity. This was mostly channelled through the nascent trades unionist movement and youth associations of Aden, but also manifested itself in the occasional tribal skirmishes in the protectorates.¹

Britain occupied Aden in 1839 primarily for its strategic position as a coaling station en route to India, as well as a preemptive move to secure her interests in the southern part of the Red Sea against French expansionism. A century later it was the emergent Italian and Saudi spheres of influence on either side of the Arabian Sea that precipitated a British response in the form of the so-called ‘forward policy’ in Aden’s hinterland.² By the end of the Second World War relations with most of the 23 local chiefdoms had been upgraded and
supplemented by advisory treaties. The aim was to better safeguard Aden’s cordon sanitaire from the irredentist claims of the Imam of Yemen and to strengthen it by effecting some kind of political and administrative reform in what the British perceived as relics of Arabia’s mediaeval past.

The existence of the relatively well-administered Kingdom of Yemen in close proximity to the Aden Protectorate, with which it formed an uninterrupted cultural and social space, posed a constant threat to the survival of the disparate South Arabian chiefdoms; particularly in case of British withdrawal. The Aden Protectorate had already been divided into a Western (WAP) and an Eastern (EAP) part in 1937, a move that represented ‘British administrative fiction’ rather than conditions on the ground. Characteristically, the EAP encompassed an area roughly four times that of the WAP. The two parts developed relatively independently under the advisory system and this was also reflected in how much more diverse the role of political officers in the WAP had become compared to that in the EAP. The job description in the standard HM Overseas Civil Service’s (HMOCS) contract would have rung equally daunting and exciting to the young, soon-to-be assistant advisers:

The prospect of office work in London for the next two years made the Department of Technical Cooperation’s offer of an administrative job in the Aden Protectorate all the more attractive as you can imagine. […] I don’t know exactly where I’m being sent but if it is the Western Protectorate my job will be “keeping the peace between tribes and sections, in providing political and security information, in supervising the activities of Government security forces and in guarding the frontier from foreign intrusion and intrigue”! In the Eastern Protectorate the assistant adviser is responsible for “guiding the states towards stability and the first foundation of ordered government”. (John Shipman (hereafter J.S.) to aunt Enid; Purley, 17 November 1962)

Eventually, the well worn colonial ‘political garment’ of federation was put forward as a solution to the perennial failure of the local chiefs to establish lasting, Western-style political structures in their respective ‘states’. At its peak in 1964 the Federation of South Arabia comprised 17 states including the former colony of Aden. However, the administrative fiction of the EAP proved stronger and the prospect of its three constituent sultanates, Qu’ayti, Kathiri, and Mahra, joining the Federation was met with resistance by the rulers as well as segments of the local population. The first two, Qu’ayti and Kathiri, formed part of the common socio-cultural space that is referred to as ‘the Hadhramaut’.
Thus, conditions in both the Federation and the Protectorate of South Arabia at the beginning of the 1960s were characterised by the haphazard nature of British policy: to develop the Federation into some sort of a functioning state, whilst at the same time continuing to provide administrative and development support through an increasing number of locally based assistant advisers. Apart from the lack of a clear vision for the future of the region, the latter had also to contend with the increasingly indifferent if not outrightly hostile attitudes of the local population towards the British presence in their land.

The passages that follow are derived from the private correspondence of John G. T. Shipman (1939–2016), who took up his position as assistant adviser in the EAP at the end of 1962 just as the first signs of political and social change were appearing in South Arabia. He served from this post in different parts of the Eastern Aden Protectorate until 1967. For the most part his letters are addressed to his parents, Brigadier Trafford and Elizabeth Shipman, and his maternal aunt Enid Boon. The photographs accompanying the text are just a small sample of the ones he took during his five years of service with HMOCS. They not only illustrate some of the incidents recounted in his correspondence, but more importantly they form an

Figure 1 A Hadhrami tribesman and his camel carrying clay wares: a tanār oven for baking bread, and grilling meat and fish (left), and a zīr pot for fresh water (right)
invaluable record of life in one of the least documented parts of the Arabian Peninsula.

The corpus of personal memoirs and autobiographical works relating to South Arabia has continued to grow over the years and their contribution to our understanding of the historical events at hand cannot be overestimated. However, Shipman’s correspondence allows for an unmediated appreciation of how people on the ground experienced these events and highlights the extent of their own grasp of the goings-on when contrasted with the historical record. In this sense, the scope of this article is to allow the voice of one of the many British colonial officials to directly narrate their encounters during the last five years of British colonial rule over southern Arabia. The perceptive eye of a young political officer coupled with the ephemeral character of his handwritten correspondence, which providentially survived for more than five decades although it was never intended for publication, offers a fresh insight into the political and social life of the Eastern Aden Protectorate.

First impressions

The Hadhramis are an extremely nice lot. The two main reasons probably being that they are great travellers, so their attitude to life isn’t too parochial, and many if not most of them are of mixed blood. For instance my driver Hassan is half Chinese!

I live by the way in an enormous house – three storeys high if you count the roof verandah, and is a jumble of halls, passages, alcoves, balconies with a few rooms thrown in for good measure! I think the maker must have built it as the spirit moved him, certainly not from an architect’s plan! Its got an indoor pool – or jabia – which is large enough for me to swim a few strokes in. The water’s changed every two or three days and is pumped up from the well in the garden.

My household staff consists of one cook/houseboy called Abbed who is young and conscientious (his wife moved from Shibam to within easy walk of the house the other day but though I have expressed a wish to meet her so far she hasn’t put in an appearance – at least while I’ve been around. Tradition dies hard here!). I’ve also an aged Sitt who comes every morning to sweep and no doubt gossip. I pay Abbed £10 a month and the Sitt 50s. (J.S. to aunt Enid; Say’un, 25 January 1963)

I was particularly grateful for this gift as few weeks previously I hadn’t a single handkerchief to my name – all the ones I brought out with me having been pummeled to shreds by the dhobi! (J.S. to aunt Enid; Say’un, 27 January 1964)

[Gayl b. Yumain] is a very poor area – settled by bedu – possession of which is disputed by the Qaiti and Kathiri States. […] The ostensible purpose of my visit to Ghail was to inspect the four diesel-driven pumps in the area, to deposit some pump/engine spares in the fort (to save the farmers concerned the long and
expensive trip to Saiun) and to see what the prospects were of interesting more people in pump engines. [...] The two nights we were at Ghail we drove out two or three miles from the town to watch bedu dancing! They dance almost every night by moonlight and their women (veiled but famous for their ‘easy virtue’) participate in the general entertainment with zest. They are incredibly uninhibited and born scroungers, but good for a laugh! Dancing is the only recreation the locality has, and probably the best way to fight boredom and depression in such an isolated area. (J.S. to parents; Say'ün, 27 September 1963)

At the end of the month I went on tour for six days to Raidat al-Seiar, Asakir and Wadi Irma in connection with various water supply schemes – the main topic of conversation amongst the bedouin then being the strange plume-like light that started appearing in the eastern sky, between 3 and 5 a.m., about a fortnight ago. It was of course a comet but they, never having seen anything like it before, put it down variously to the imminence of doomsday, divine displeasure, indication of further drought or, more optimistically, to a sign of rain (often referred to as RAHMA = mercy). (J.S. to parents; Say'ün, 8 November 1965)
Advisory duties

The list of duties an assistant adviser was expected to perform during his service varied considerably from post to post and was more often than not of a reactive rather than proactive nature, trying to keep pace with local developments and particularly deal with ‘recalcitrant’ tribes. The position came also with a certain degree of prestige, as the local representative of colonial authority, although Shipman was already aware of the disparity between public expressions of respect and popular sentiments towards British presence in the Hadhramaut.

I had to stand in for Jim Ellis yesterday afternoon at the opening of Shibam’s first fish shop! The fish is flown to the Hadhramaut from Mukalla in ice boxes. […] By 4.30, shortly after I and an Australian engineer from Aden had arrived, a large crowd collected just inside the town gates. Coloured mats had been laid out for us to sit on and along the perimeter people were several rows deep. Masses of children. The Naib of Shibam arrived after a few minutes and sat next to me and the speeches began. I got up to make the second speech somewhat apprehensive as the people of Shibam are enthusiastic listeners to ‘Voice of the Arabs’ which has been urging the South Arabians to oust the imperialist jackals from their hearths, for sometime! […] The mention of the U.A.R. drew some brisk handclapping
as you can imagine and everyone clapped politely after I had finished. It’s very difficult to assess these peoples’ true feelings though.

I haven’t met the Sultan yet but one of his brothers Amir Majid called at the Residency Office the other day to have his passport signed (by me). We act as a consular agency (as does the Residency Mukalla – our office being an extension of it) and none can travel outside the Kathiri or Qaiti States without an Assistant Adviser’s signature on his passport. […] During the last week or so I have signed a large number of passports and visas for Arabs going on the Hajj to Mecca. Perhaps a third of these were genuine pilgrims (Ramadhan by the way is due to start tomorrow, the signal being the firing of a cannon from the palace) and the rest in fact would have been on their way to Saudi Arabia to look for work or to set up food and drink booths on the way to mulct the stream of devotees of their cash!

(J.S. to aunt Enid; Say’un, 25 January 1963)

I have paid two visits to Wadi Arda in the Eastern Area during the last week in connection with the road Richard [Etridge] cleared for Pan American vehicles (short cut to where the oil company will be drilling) which requires widening in certain places to enable lorries of ten ton carrying capacity and over to use it. A number of points had to be settled with Muqaddam Eidha bin Hariz (paramount Muqaddam of the Manahil tribe through whose territory the road passes) over the payment of the beduin guards who ‘protect’ the road scheme and one or two personal requests of his own which Richard had left rather in the air, before work could be started. Muqaddam Eidha is a small rather unimpressive looking man but he has great personality and a hearty sense of humour which certainly facilitates negotiations. Two days after my first visit a leg of ibex arrived for me with his compliments by hand of the truck driver working with the scheme. (J.S. to parents; Say’un, 21 July 1964)

With South Arabian nationalists vying for influence in the post-British era, the colonial authorities attempted to contain the activities of various ‘political undesirables’. Shipman thus became an unwitting member of ‘Operation Snaffle’ aiming to dislodge a group of Mahra dissidents from the island of Soqotra. What he and his colleagues would not have known at the time, though, was that NLF infiltrators in both the wireless stations of al-Mukalla and Soqotra offered ample forewarning to their comrades, who provided no resistance and some even managed to escape to the island’s mountains. Leading their party was the later governor of al-Mahra, Muhammad Salim b. ‘Akkush.

The day before yesterday I nearly went to sea! Unbeknown to me Jim Ellis and his military adviser Philip Hillman had been planning an operation to trap a party of Mahra political undesirables who had sailed from Qishn on the Mahra coast to Soqotra, about a week ago, to persuade Sultan Aissa to dissolve the Mahra Tribal Council to which they were politically opposed. Certain members of the party were known to be connected with the N.L.F. The main feature of the operation was the landing of nearly three platoons of Arab troops on the island (without warning the Sultan) to take the malefactors by surprise but in case they
got wind of this or left the island earlier than anticipated they also arranged for a
minesweeper to be available to intercept their dhow and escort it to al-Ghaidhah.
I was to have joined the minesweeper as interpreter. I packed my bag and was
all keyed up to go when news came that the party was still on the island and
their dhow had left for East Africa. The following morning troops were airlifted
into Hadibo and the operation was a 100% success. (J.S. to parents; al-Mukalla,
9 March 1967)

The local scene

Sultan Hussein bin Ali’s [al-Kathiri] Accession Day was celebrated though he
himself was absent. […] Two poems were read, the first being largely a eulogy
of H.H., the second more down-to-earth and touching on political developments
in the Arab world, need for unity and more constructive schemes etc. Fortunately,
that hero of Arab nationalism Gamal Abdul Nasser was not mentioned by name as
it might have had a rather subversive effect on the large numbers of primary school-
boys present – his most ardent admirers or so it would seem! (J.S. to parents;
Say’un, 14 December 1963)
The Acting R.A. [Resident Adviser] Ralph Daly and his wife, Richard [Etridge],
myself and the Morrisons were having dinner with Sultan Hussein and members
of his family when a signal was received from Tarim saying that the Pundits
there had glimpsed the moon and that Ramadhan should therefore commence that same night. The news was greeted with a tremendous flurry of excitement. The Sultanic order was signed and telegraphed to all Kathiri outposts and to Aden where Ramadhan had in fact already started but some of the up-country states like Lahej prefer to follow the Kathiri lead in matters of this sort. (J.S. to parents; Say’un, 26 January 1964)

Ramadhan ended last Friday – the first day of Idd al-Fitr – and we all went to the Sultan’s Palace to say ‘Idd Mubarak’ (Happy Idd) to him, his family and other dignitaries. Greetings take place after his return from the mosque, behind the Palace, which is heralded by beating of drums, cannon fire and rifle shots.

I took my camera with me this time, after clearing the matter with Hussein bin Salih, the Deputy State Secretary, who told me there would be no objection, and got what I hope will turn out to be some very colourful shots of the Sultan ascending the steps of the inner courtyard of the palace, wearing his golden Saudi agal and gold short-sword tucked under his belt, flanked by the Kathiri Princes, with a large crowd of retainers and well-wishers processing on behind. At the further end of the courtyard and the surrounding walls were large numbers of women and children and the girls not old enough to be clapped into purdah which usually happens about the age of thirteen were most beautifully turned out – their brilliant dresses contrasting vividly with the sombre garments of the women. (J.S. to parents; Say’un, 21 February 1964)

Resident assistant adviser in Soqotra

One of the most challenging relationships between the British colonial authorities and a local ruler were those with the Mahra Sultan of Qishn and Soqotra, ‘Isa b. ‘Ali b. Salim b. ‘Afrar. Ever since the transfer of the seat of sultanic authority from al-Mahra in the Arabian mainland to the island of Soqotra in the 1890s, the Banu ‘Afrar sultans showed little interest in the affairs of the Mahra tribes, preferring the safety and seclusion of their island, a behaviour that was probably also informed by the numerous attempts of various colonial powers to claim the strategically located island for themselves. Similarly, until the early 1960s the British were content to leave the sultans to their own devices, with the EAP Resident Adviser paying a customary visit once a year to ensure the British flag still flew above Hadibu and the sultan adhered to the terms of the advisory treaty.9

Apparently one of my main functions will be to try and bring Sultan Isa a little more into touch with the outside world. He’s very much of a recluse and has an almost pathological fear that certain of his mainland tribesmen are planning his demise! He only recently recruited a bodyguard of Hamumi beduin who are originally Qaiti
Figure 5 Sultan Husayn b. ‘Ali al-Kathiri (centre, in black jacket) in procession from the mosque back to his palace in Say‘un after the ‘Id al-Fitr prayers, 15 February 1964

Figure 6 Women and children observing the ‘Id al-Fitr sultanic procession in the inner courtyard of the Kathiri palace in Say‘un
Those were Shipman’s impressions before he arrived together with his cook, ‘Abed, in Soqotra on an RAF Beverley as the first ‘Resident’ Assistant Adviser in June 1964. One of the main purposes of his posting there was to discuss with the sultan issues pertaining to oil exploration in his Mahra possessions. To that end, the Aden Manager of the Pan American Oil Company, Mr West, had also flown to the island to discuss the payment of oil rentals with the sultan. The talks were interesting but slow:

Sultan Eissa understands Arabic pretty well though it would be impolite for him to admit it as conducting negotiations in Soqotran through his Wazir, who acts as interpreter, gives him a breathing space to think out his replies to awkward questions or requests. He does speak a little Arabic in his more expansive moods which are few and far between. He very rarely smiles and if you can make him laugh you’ve really made a hit. I only got a glimmer of a smile out of him when I asked him if I could photograph him which he very obligingly agreed to – turning up the next day at his council chamber in his full regalia – Saudi agal, gold dagger (he went to the Hedjaz on pilgrimage in 1956) and gold plated sword (gift of the A.O.C. I believe). I had to photograph him indoors as there was a howling wind outside. [... ] He is also illiterate and therefore relies very considerably on his Wazir Ibrahim – a sophisticated charming but plausible man in his forties of mixed Arab/African blood. (J.S. to parents; Say’un, 21 July 1964)

I had three meetings with him. He is a suspicious, vacillating man and very rarely smiles – in fact maintains a rather sour faced expression most of the time (which I believe conceals a not unpleasant nature). (J.S. to aunt Enid; Say’un, 21 July 1964).

Whilst waiting for the elusive Soqotri sultan to return to Hadibu from his mountain retreat, Shipman was able to conduct a five-day tour of the island, crossing the Haggeher mountains accompanied by his cook, two Hadhrami Beduin Legion (HBL) soldiers and four camels with their drivers.

Some beduin emerged from the little settlement at Darhu to greet us, led by a man with a short dark beard and finely drawn features looking like a young Old Testament prophet. I was introduced to his party which included the local Muqaddam [’Amr b. Muhammad]. The ‘prophet’ turned out to be one Sayyid Ali half-brother of Sultan Eissa bin Hamed (better known as the ‘Little Sultan’). Several years previously he had guided Jock Snell round the island and also knew John Weakley when he was there in 1956. Seemed a pleasant intelligent man. I suggested we should kill a goat for supper so a fast runner was dispatched to bring one. A large shaggy creature was produced for my inspection. The
Figure 7 A Soqotri man watches the landing of the Dakota aeroplane that brought to the island the Aden Manager of the Pan American Oil Company, with the towering Haggeher peaks in the distance
Muqaddam knelt down beside it and began intoning – rubbing its fleece with a curious movement of his hand for a few minutes. It was a sort of prayer invocation to Mother Nature to bless and protect the rest of his herd. He then reached for his knife and led the victim away to slaughter it behind the cover of a stone wall. With a few deft strokes of his knife he peeled of the shaggy fleece and with the eager assistance of the camel drivers began to dismember the carcass of flesh. We divided it into two as the camelmen had their own cooking procedure which Abbed and the two jundis [HBL soldiers] looked somewhat askance at. The latter made a fire and arranged portions of the goatmeat between and under the hot stones. Ahmed mixed flour and water into a thick paste which he then kneaded into four flat cakes. Soon the meat was hissing while the smoke blew this way and that way in the wind. (J.S. diary entry on 26 June 1964)

The Mahra Tribal Council

Another chance to deal with the affairs of the Sultanate of Qishn and Soqotra came when Shipman was posted as Adviser to the newly formed Mahra Tribal Council (MTC) in the summer of 1966 in the coastal town of al-Ghaidha. The opportunity arose after the so-called ‘opening up’ of Mahra country in the wake of ‘Operation Gunboat’.  

All previous attempts to penetrate it have been unsuccessful but this time things haven’t gone too badly because we went in in force and caught most people by surprise. One particular tribe near Ghaidhah (the port where the oil company intends to land some of their heavy drilling equipment) has been pretty hostile and a Shackleton had to be brought up from Aden to carry out a punitive bombing exercise against selected targets in one of the tribe’s (Beit Kudda) larger settlements which was, of course, cleared beforehand to avoid loss of life. I don’t know whether the ‘thrashing’ did the trick or not.

The main purpose of the expedition to Mahra is to provide the oil company with security when prospecting as the Residency is bound to do under the terms of the oil agreement with the three states, and secondarily to provide the Mahris with the rudiments of an administration – at the moment practically every tribe, town and village is a law unto itself, though the Sultan has some influence in Qishn on the coast. (J.S. to parents; Say’un, 15 November 1963)

Whilst the ruler, Sultan ʿIsa, resided in Soqotra, the mainland tribes of the sultanate were under the nominal control of Sultan Saʿad b. ʿAli b. ʿAfrar, his younger brother. The latter’s inability to live up to British expectations and fulfil the role of a constitutional ruler rather than that of a traditional tribal arbiter is characteristic of the destabilising effect British attempts at state-building had on the already vulnerable chiefdoms of South Arabia.
He is a weak and ineffective person quite unfitted to control the various factions in the council and I have to do most of his work for him from the point of view of chairmanship – opening and summing up discussions etc. Generally however he is a friendly little person but lacks any real interest in mainland affairs and is always preoccupied either with his own financial affairs or with the domestic news he gleans from the island via our wireless operator. […] We shall be holding an important meeting in the next few days to discuss various matters – possibility of coming to terms with an American oil company which has expressed an interest in prospecting here, the question of sending a delegation abroad to discuss Mahra’s future with neighbouring Arab countries and the vital need for development aid and various internal problems which are affecting the Council’s cohesion and morale. […] In many respects working here is a more rewarding experience than in Saiun. There is a great deal to be done in the little time that is now left to us before H.M.G. withdraws and the Mahra, as well they realise, are by no means ready for independence. […] The last company withdrew in June this year to the great disappointment of the Mahra whose budget depended entirely on their oil rentals. These have now been replaced by a grant of £30,000 from H.M.G. but this is intended to be only a temporary measure – our idea being to shift the financial burden, if it can be called that, onto other shoulders as quickly as possible. (J.S. to parents; al-Ghaidha, 25 August 1966)
Indeed almost a year later “The M.T.C. have sent a letter to the U.N. saying they don’t want independence in 1968!” (J.S. to aunt Enid; al-Mukalla, 1 May 1967).

**Early Troubles**

There were demonstrations here and in Mukalla at the end of August over the issue of admitting Egyptian teachers into the Hadhramaut which became a general excuse for letting out a lot of political steam. […] Here things culminated in a crowd of about five hundred marching on the Residency. Most of them appeared to be schoolboys though there was a hard core of adults leading the ritual denunciations of colonialism and waving banners. (J.S. to parents; Say’un, 2 October 1964)

At the beginning of last month we had demonstrations here in protest against H.M.G.’s resumption of direct rule in Aden. For two days we had somewhat of an anxious time due to the local state’s complete failure to take any precautionary measures to control crowds and prevent hooliganism. Most of the demonstrators were schoolboys but there was a hard core of adult organisers. The second day the Secretariat closed down at the request of a deputation of schoolboys and merchants were intimidated into shutting up shop. The Sultan is alleged to have given
the demonstrators his blessing (he could hardly have done otherwise as the O.C. Kathiri Forces have been given no instructions to bring in reinforcements or even to take any action at all) and we were besieged in the Residency office for about 20 minutes by a chanting mob of some three hundred. We were asked to close down but refused and finally the crowd marched off after much snarling and fist waving. […] Saiun is more or less its old self again although the state’s prestige and authority have suffered badly and small boys’ tongues are more active against ‘imperialism’ than previously. (J.S. to parents; Say’un, 8 November 1965)

A momentous event in the modern history of Hadhramaut was the death of Sayyid Sir Abu Bakr b. Shaykh al-Kaf, one of the leading personalities of the Kathiri sultanate. Sayyid Bubakr, as he was known, was instrumental in inviting British interference in Hadhrami affairs, but by the end of his life felt let down both by British policies in his homeland and by the decline of his fortunes in Singapore.11

I got on well with Sir Sayyid Abubakr though one used to feel very small in his presence. […] He provided a physical link with the past, spoke his mind freely, saw insofar as he could that grievances were redressed, was guide and counsellor to people from all parts of the country with a very clear conception of justice as the moral basis of government – a condition which he considered our advisory position here did not fulfil – as he was always pointing out. […] All this morning hundreds of people were filing up and down the steps of his house to express their condolences to his family. The Bank Manager, John Ducker, the Agricultural Officer, and I all attended. While prayers were being said inside and outside the Taher Mosque a crowd of urchins edged towards us and started making a nuisance of themselves. At one point their ill-mannered chatter and giggling broke into a shrill chorus of shouting which created an embarrassing diversion. Their behaviour was particularly shocking considering we were attending the funeral of such a distinguished man. Only one or two people had the guts to speak out. We wedged ourselves firmly in the middle of the procession on our way to the cemetery where the body was to be interred but on arrival we were again surrounded. When we turned to leave we were followed and a few stones were thrown till somebody came and chased the boys away. We felt most incensed but maintained our composure. We shall be putting in a complaint on Saturday. (J.S. to parents; Say’un, 2 December 1965)

We are living in an uneasy peace here, political activity (much of it pro F.L.O.S.Y.) is increasing particularly in the Qaiti State and there has been considerable tribal unrest not unconnected with Britain’s decision to withdraw in 1968. […] Funds are beginning to run short now just as applications for assistance have begun to increase. We had little rain in April and there is serious drought in the northern and eastern desert areas. (J.S. to father; Say’un, 1 June 1966)

An incident occurred in Mukalla last week which may be a pointer to things to come. An explosion charge, possibly plastic, was placed against the outside wall
of an Assistant Adviser’s house some distance from the Residency in a Mukalla suburb. […] The political arm of the N.L.F. is stepping up its activities in the E.A.P. although some sort of counterpoise has emerged recently in the South Arabian League which is Saudi orientated and seems to have started gaining ground in some tribal areas. The possibility of the Qaiti and Kathiri States joining the Federation is now very remote. (J.S. to parents; Say’un, 19 June 1966)

In Hadhramaut the situation is much more advanced [compared to al-Mahra] and the people there are much more susceptible to foreign propaganda. One’s advice is rarely solicited and more often than not resented. Now that H.M.G. has stopped all development aid over and above her recurrent commitments the Assistant Adviser’s function there is purely political i.e. liaising between the Residency and local state and occasional excursions to security troublespots in the desert and of course intelligence which is a rather negative exercise as our advisory relationship gives us no executive authority to act on the information we get about
subversive activities and arms smuggling. We have thus lost the initiative and the local states have neither the will nor the resources to do very much other than to warn and wait on events with characteristic fatalism. Meanwhile the elements in league with Yemen and the U.A.R. have almost carte blanche to organise opposition by fair means and foul to H.M.G.’s policy for South Arabia and have succeeded in firmly entrenching themselves in Mukalla in the unions and clubs and, with the support of most of the local press, in intimidating the two states. Al-Ghaidhah, where there is a great deal of pro British feeling, is like a breath of fresh air to all this! (J.S. to parents; al-Ghaidha, 25 August 1966)

Disintegration of order

The last six months of the British presence in the EAP Shipman spent in the Residency in al-Mukalla. This gave him a first-hand experience of political and ‘terrorist’ activity in the capital of the Qu‘ayti sultanate. His letters home, which became much more frequent, describe a progressively worsening situation, during which he and his colleagues strove to maintain a semblance of normality in their daily lives amidst the disintegration of colonial and local authority.

I saw the Kathiri Sultan for over an hour in the evening before I left Saiun to return to Mukalla. He talked a great deal about the adverse effect that the worsening situation in Aden was having on Hadhrami morale and said people had begun to express support for the terrorist organisations there in the belief that time was on their side. […] We had a two day strike here earlier this week organised by groups affiliated to F.L.O.S.Y. and N.L.F. in protest against the arrival of the U.N. Mission. Overnight slogans appeared scrawled on walls along the main street of Mukalla urging the mission to talk only to F.L.O.S.Y. or to N.L.F. as factional loyalty dictated. There were one or two demonstrations but nothing particularly fierce – until Tuesday when Jim Ellis was stopped by a barricade of drums blocking the road through the town of Shihr (about 28 miles East of Mukalla) and his two vehicles stoned by an unpleasant mob of youths as they were turning round to get through by another route. […] The same mob turned back the Naib of Shihr the previous day. So either the Qaiti State now acts firmly to prevent such incidents occurring again or it will have to abdicate. (J.S. to parents; al-Mukalla, 7 April 1967)

We have a great deal of drama here during the last few days of a rather unpleasant nature. Monday was a black day beginning with the news of our doctor Jimmie Anderson’s death in hospital in Aden and ending with two bazooka attacks on the Residency of which you may have already read or heard something. […] At nine o’clock the same evening a bazooka was fired at the Military Assistant’s house at a range of about 50 yards from outside the Residency compound wall followed by a burst of machine gun fire. […] We all said nothing else would happen that night. We were wrong. At 12pm there was another explosion this time on the
eastern flank of the Residency […] All the European families were brought into the Resident’s house where we spent the rest of the night talking and drinking coffee waiting for what might happen next. Fortunately nothing did. Near morning all wives and children were evacuated to Aden […] A curfew has been imposed but the local state forces are already overstretched and there are not enough men to make this really effective. Besides the forces lack leadership and experience in dealing with acts of terrorism which have no precedent here. Leaflets have been distributed in the name of the N.L.F. making it clear that the bazooka incidents were a carefully planned prelude to a declaration of war so to speak on the Residency and the Sultans. The N.L.F. have also asked the armed forces to declare whether they are for or against ‘the Revolution’ so the situation here can now be described without exaggeration as pretty serious. The Qaiti State simply do not have the will nor they say the strength to take the N.L.F. to task. The four men who were responsible for the first bazooka attack were seen by the Chief of Police amongst others but their weapons gave them a distinctive advantage. People are too afraid to talk.
The whole atmosphere here has changed overnight and it seems to be only a matter of time now before we leave as the British Government is not prepared to give us the means to stay on and do something positive to save this country from breaking up and passing under the control of Egyptian clients when we leave.
Sir Richard Turnbull’s replacement by Trevelyan is being interpreted as a sell-out to Nasser which it may well be. If so the British Government will have to start looking for a new team to apply its new policy of negotiating with F.L.O.S.Y. and other terrorist groups as we, and almost certainly the Advisory staff in the Federation, will be handing in our resignations. […] The only measure possible now to salvage something of the moral and political wreck of the Qaiti State would be for us to send in British troops to clean up the N.L.F. elements responsible for the recent outrages and get the state forces to take over the administration. This would do something to restore people’s confidence which has been badly shaken by the seemingly permissive attitude of the local authorities. […] The present drift of events makes one feel extremely embittered and depressed as everything points to the fact that we will be letting down our many friends here and handing the country over to the Egyptians and those whom they have subverted by offers of money and arms. (J.S. to parents; al-Mukalla, 17 May 1967)
The Arab–Israeli war inevitably affected the situation here and anti-British feeling rose to an unprecedented pitch. Rioting and demonstrations occurred both here and in Saiun. In Saiun rioters set fire to all the vehicles in the Residency compound, destroying most of them. The Commandant of the local state forces turned a deaf ear to all pleas for assistance and the reliability of the few H.B.L. guards in the Residency at the time to defend British lives was in serious doubt. A hot debate followed as to whether British troops should be called in to maintain security. No decision was taken till the 10th when it was forced by the outbreak of disturbances here.
The Residency was suddenly stormed by a crowd of about three hundred (I don’t think this is an exaggeration). The gates weren’t properly secured by the Mukalla
Regular Army Guard – probably deliberately as one or two of them were later seen to be mingling with the demonstrators – and in they poured and started hurling rocks and stones at Residency quarters and our vehicles. [...] Just as the crowd was coming into view from behind the lower offices another throng broke in from the other gate and advanced towards us. In a moment or two the Residency was subjected to a hail of stones. While I fastened the shutters and windows Jim Ellis who has the physique of an ox marched down the steps in an effort to reason with the crowd and was soon dodging and pushing his way around the advance party of demonstrators giving as good as he got. We lingered above the steps ducking the crowd’s missiles till reluctantly he gave the H.B.L. guard the order to fire. In seconds the Residency square was clear. A moment later we were under fire from the direction of the Sultan’s Palace which is situated opposite the Residency about two hundred yards away. [...] Rifle fire and bursts of machine gun fire continued for about half an hour. The house echoed with the noise of splintering wood and the thud of bullets against the exterior walls. The three British signallers upstairs in the crow’s nest above the front drawing room had a nasty time as they had practically no cover at all – the front and sides of their room being constructed of wooded boarding. Shortly after the firing stopped I went to see them to find them spreadeagled across the floor clasping their rifles. [...] We discovered later that most of the firing had come from the direction of the Palace and Qaiti signals’ station although some had also come from the town east of the Residency. The Palace Guard had apparently opened fire in response to the few shots that had been fired in their direction to scare the demonstrators away but the fact that it
continued for as long as it did and the various points against which their fire was concentrated was fairly conclusive evidence that they had wanted to have a go at us and were in active sympathy if not open collusion with the people who had organised the demonstration. The M.R.A. officers on duty at the Palace do not appear to have been involved and one or two of them tried to stop the firing but failed to bring the situation under control till after Residency buildings had been liberally spattered with bullet holes. The incident clearly showed that the M.R.A. which is composed largely of mercenary elements from Yafa in the Western Aden Protectorate is pretty ill-disposed towards us. (J.S. to parents; al-Mukalla, 30 June 1967)

The same letter then goes on to describe a number of other incidents that took place in al-Mukalla during that fateful July such as a grenade attack on the bank manager.

In the course of the investigation that followed eleven witnesses came forward to state that they had actually seen the Bank Manager throw the grenade himself! People here are so ostrich minded that they are prepared to see the sinister hand of the British behind every act of terrorism that occurs here or believe rumours to this effect. It does of course save them from facing the facts squarely.

Eventually, after yet another explosion at the bank:

The Manager’s nerves and those of his assistant were pretty frayed by this stage and they decided they had had enough of Mukalla after this explosion. The Bank has been closed since their departure causing considerable economic dislocation.

Notwithstanding these attacks, including the blowing up of a Shell petrol station, and a bazooka attack against the H.B.L. Commandant Colonel Johnson, the letter finishes with the reminder that “News from Aden is extremely disturbing these days. Mukalla is a haven of calm in comparison!” This was confirmed a few days later in a letter to Shipman from Aden by one of the local staff of the Residency. Faruq b. Shamlan had just returned to South Arabia from a public administration course at the South Devon Technical College in Torquay.12

We are staying in the Jazirah Hotel and we only allow ourselves to go out in the morning for couple of hours for shopping then come back and shut ourselves indoors till next morning. You know the situation now in Aden. I hope everything is quiet in Mukalla and Saiun. I am taking my father with me to Sowaini and as you might have heard that he was injured in seven different parts of the body while he was enjoying his cup of coffee at Zakko Coffee House near Jazirah Hotel when a hand grenade was thrown. (Faruq b. Shamlan to J.S.; Aden, 6 August 1967)
Eventually, even Shipman himself was the subject of a similar attack:

I had a narrow escape last month when I was driving along a road in Dis (Mukalla suburb) with an Arab driver and two S.A.S. guards in the back of the landrover and Charles Guthrie, who is i/c the S.A.S. detachment posted to the Residency, when a mine exploded about three feet in front of us. The blast shattered the windscreen. The mine had been electrically detonated seconds too soon. Later the N.L.F. claimed responsibility! (J.S. to parents; al-Mukalla, 12 August 1967).

Little would he expect, though, that a quarter of a century later he would be hosted by the perpetrator himself, Colonel ‘Abd al-Rahim Ahmad ‘Atiq, during his first visit to united Yemen in 1993.13

Exodus

One of the most controversial episodes during the British retreat from South Arabia was undeniably the early evacuation of the British Residency in al-Mukalla “in the heat of the post-lunch rest-period, without any notice to any state official or anyone else” in the end of August 1967.14 This “hateful business”, as Shipman concedes to his parents, has not only haunted the memories of those involved, but has invariably been used to give credence to the theory that Britain deliberately orchestrated the absence of the local rulers in Geneva in order to give to the advancing NLF a free hand.15

The Residency was not scheduled to close till the beginning of October so our precipitate departure caused widespread shock bordering on despair. I was in al-Ghaidha (the administrative centre of Mahra State) when I received the news of our imminent withdrawal from Mukalla last Tuesday night. [...] I flew back in one of the Beverleys sent to lift out the S.A.S contingent who had been posted to al-Ghaidha to familiarise themselves with conditions there and to train the recently formed Mahra Armed Constabulary. [...] Anyway, the enchantment of being back [in al-Ghaydha] was abruptly broken on Tuesday night shortly after we had returned to our lodgings in the H.B.L. fort. The message relaying the decision to evacuate us to Riyam was in code. Faruq [b. Shamlan] was the only Arab officer to know about it till the news became public the following evening with the added twist that instead of being allowed to operate from Riyam we were to be withdrawn altogether from the E.A.P. [...] Our exit was for security reasons very carefully planned and kept a closely guarded secret. We all had to pretend that Wednesday was just another normal working day. [...] I had to make several appointments to see people the following day as if I was still going to be there. It was a hateful business. (J.S. to parents; Aden, 5 September 1967)
We flew to Aden in an RAF Argosy on 2 September, taking a young Mahri student with us who was returning to Kuwait to resume his secondary school studies. His
father is employed by H.M.G. as a Junior Assistant Adviser and was away at Geneva at the time with the Mahra Sultan for discussions with the U.N. Commission on South Arabia. Tragedy struck the family recently when the N.L.F. murdered the boy’s uncle Omar bin Ashoor in Mukalla last month. He was shot through the head at night as he was returning home after buying bread at the local bakery. I knew Omar well – in fact he spent an hour in my office the morning of the day he was killed. His death was a great shock to us all and a great loss to the Mahra Tribal Council whom he acted for in Mukalla. […] We have had no political news from the E.A.P. since our arrival here but I imagine it won’t be long before the N.L.F. stage a take-over in Mukalla, particularly as Sultan Ghalib is still away. He and Sultan Hussein both went to Geneva (via Cairo) last month at H.M.G.’s instigation and by withdrawing during their absence we’ve actually sold them ‘down the river’. […] Aden is really in a mess. […] An atmosphere of despondent malaise hangs in the High Commission and very little work seems to get done there. One has to do everything, except typing, oneself. […] Living and working in Aden is joyless and although I was offered a job here, I declined. The whole place is breaking up. (J.S. to parents; Aden, 13 September 1967)

Thus, Shipman’s career as colonial political officer, much like that of his many colleagues, came to an inglorious end, aptly summarised by the clinical, bureaucratic language of the Establishments Department
of the crumbling Federation of South Arabia: “I would like to take this opportunity of thanking you for the good service you have given to the territory over a period of nearly 5 years and to express my regret that the situation should have so developed as to lead to the premature termination of your services” (J. W. Laidlaw to J.S.; al-Ittihad, 14 September 1967). Almost a year earlier, the sultans of the EAP received an equally dispassionate, but portentous harbinger of things to come by the High Commissioner. “My dear friend, in the light of the changed circumstances in South Arabia […] HM The Queen will not after the date of independence continue to extend her protection…” (Sir Richard Turnbull to Sultan Ghalib b. ʿAwadh al-Quʿayti of Shihr & Mukalla; Aden, 28 December 1966).

Having spent five years of his life at a rather impressionable age in southwest Arabia, Shipman decided to place his knowledge and experience in the service of the Foreign Office. To this end he joined the Middle East Centre for Arab Studies (MECAS) in Lebanon, from where he continued to follow events in Hadhramaut. In fact, during his various postings in the Arabian Peninsula, he maintained close ties with a number of Hadhrami and Mahra friends and would take up with the British Government requests for compensation or for the award of pensions to locals who had worked for the British.

A Hadhrami student at A.U.B. sent me two October issues of a Mukalla paper called the Taliaah which were a sad commentary on the changes that are being made by the N.L.F. who are popularising the myth of a heroic people’s revolution against reactionary bloodsucking Sultans. In yesterday’s issue of the Lebanese paper ‘Al Hayat’ I read that the N.L.F. in E.A.P. have now directed the abolition of all Shariaa courts and are contemplating the importation of legal advisers from communist China to assist them create a new legal structure. The Hadhrami Beduin Legion is reported to be opposed to this and I only hope they can put paid to such a lunatic suggestion which would completely upset the basis of Hadhrami social life. (J.S. to aunt Enid; Shemlan, Lebanon, 19 November 1967)

**Conclusion**

John Shipman’s correspondence is an eloquent albeit tragic first-hand account of the end of Empire in the Middle East. His own emotional and material trajectory from the early optimistic and expectant encounters with the people of south-west Arabia to the undignified, disguised retreat
is a direct reflection of the failed decolonisation process and the aimless character of British policy during her last years in South Arabia. The experiences of no other political actor of that period exemplify the challenges, frustrations, and ultimate disappointments and defeat as they were embodied in the lives of the last British assistant advisers. Because of the nature of their role they were caught up between serving the colonial master that had placed them there, and upholding the interests of the people they were supposed to advise and direct. A traumatic affair that left behind many painful memories.16

Moreover, Shipman’s eyewitness accounts of significant events and personalities of his time raise a number of important points that help to understand the nuances of British policy on the ground, as well as to clarify the historical record. What becomes immediately obvious from his letters is the very little accurate information the Residency and its officers had on the scale and breadth of nationalist activity in the EAP. This was accentuated by the unwillingness of locals to associate themselves with the waning imperial power and is also reflected in the increasing mistrust with which Shipman and his colleagues viewed even the representatives of British-sponsored local institutions. His own scathing assessments of the ability of the local states to stem the wave of militant activity against both themselves and the British are indicative of the ease with which the colonial construct collapsed once political and financial support were withdrawn. This was not helped by the ill-founded expectation to forge modern, functioning administrations out of an agglomeration of disparate political entities without adequate financial support and within a short period of time.

The enduring legacy of the British withdrawal from South Arabia has remained, ultimately, the total failure to safeguard the future of any of the British-sponsored institutions and the abandonment of erstwhile allies, events that were keenly observed across the empire, not least by the Trucial Coast rulers, whose protection treaties were next to be terminated. In this sense, it has been often argued that the apparent success of the UAE federation was born out of the failed experience of its South Arabian equivalent. In spite of Shipman’s and his colleagues’ efforts, Sharif Husayn of Bayhan’s oft-quoted dictum, that “it is better to be England’s enemy than her friend; in the former case there is a possibility of being bought, but in the latter the certainty of being sold”, very poignantly foreshadowed his and his South Arabian counterparts’ fate.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to express his gratitude to Robert Shipman for making available his brother’s correspondence and photographic slides for this article.

NOTES

6. This was comet Ikeya-Seki, also known as the Great Comet of 1965.
16. It is characteristic that even after all those years not all former colonial political officers have been willing to share their personal memories and “revisit painful memories”. cf. Hinchcliffe et al., op. cit., p. 6.