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John M. Willis. Unmaking North and South: Cartographies of the Yemeni Past 1857-1934
Thanos Petouris
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This book is a fascinating account of a key period in Saudi Arabia’s history and is also relevant to understanding Saudi Arabia’s role in current events in the Middle East and more widely. It is therefore to be recommended for anyone interested in the politics of Saudi Arabia and the House of Sa’ud.

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The recent youth uprisings in Yemen have exposed the inability of the regime to address regional challenges to the authority of the state. The Zaydi revivalist (*al-Huthi*) rebellion in the far north and the ‘Southern Question’ have cast doubt on the tenets of the unification of the country in 1990, and our own perceptions of what constitutes a uniform Yemeni identity and geographical space. In this book, Professor Willis has set himself the task of exploring the construction of North and South Yemen, not as points of social affiliation, but as distinct historical spaces, thus explaining the persistence of ‘North’ and ‘South’ as categories of analysis, and the local attachment to their historical memory more than 20 years after the respective states ceased to exist. To this end, he uses as a *terminus ad quem* of his research the year 1934, in which the Anglo-Yemeni Treaty was signed, bringing an end to a protracted period of uncertainty and outright hostility between the Imamate of Yemen and the British Aden Protectorate.

*Unmaking North and South* falls within the discipline of ‘spatial history’. The book does not attempt to provide a comprehensive account of a specific geographical unit, but it rather seeks to highlight the historical practices which led to the constitution of a particular geographical space as such. In the Yemeni case, Willis argues that the application by the British of the Indian or ‘durbar’ form of governance in the South, and the exceptional character of Ottoman policies in the Vilayet of Yemen, which were also adopted by its successor imamic regime, defined the emergence of North and South both as self-contained spaces and in contradistinction to one another. In comparing the parallel lives of the two entities, the book illuminates the ways in which both
brought disparate geographical and social units under centralised forms of governance. This process of the ‘ordering of space’ was contingent upon forms of interaction between the colonial and imamic centres and local actors, allowing for the emergence of ‘an interstitial political space’ in the borderlands, which belonged to none.

The merit of this approach is that it rejects the essentialist hypothesis that a singular Yemeni space and identity have existed since the beginning of time, only to be divided by British and Ottoman imperialism. On the contrary, the author questions the inevitability of a united Yemen as the result of a ‘natural’ political process of national consolidation, and successfully deconstructs long-held assumptions about colonial and imamic policies. Specifically, he rejects the idea of Yemeni isolation by demonstrating how involved the imamic regime was in regional Arab discourses on Islam. At the same time, he sheds ample light on the arbitrariness of British colonial policies in relation to local tribes, and the absurd edifice of the tribal ordering system they engendered.

This is a well-researched work, which is based on Willis’s earlier doctoral thesis; its strength lies in his recourse to an extraordinary number of hitherto untapped primary sources, especially Arabic ones from a number of private and public Yemeni archives. Inevitably, the particular character of the historical fragments it examines will appeal to a more specialist audience that is familiar with the details of the history of this part of south-western Arabia. However, despite the density of the text, and fragmentary character of the historical episodes it examines, the book yields rare gems of information about a rather understudied place and time. The only drawback is the lack of more detailed maps, which would have aided even seasoned travellers of Yemen in pinpointing the many regions, villages, and tribes discussed in the book.

Overall, this is a laudable effort at reconstructing the history of mid-19th- and early 20th-century Yemen, one that challenges the ways in which academic research on the country has heretofore addressed questions of identity, colonialism, external intervention, and regional dynamics. It will therefore remain a valuable point of reference for future researchers of Yemen, North and South.