



The Deserts of Hesperides: An Experience of Libya

Anthony Thwaite

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This book is a record of my life in and reactions to Libya during the two periods I have lived there: first as a British army conscript in Tripolitania from June 1950 to July 1951, then as a university teacher in Cyrenaica from September 1965 to July 1967. That there is a connection between the two — that my second stay was the result of my first — quickly becomes apparent. To revisit a Land of Lost Content is supposed to be a mistake, and I dare say it generally is. One thinks of those public school Captains of Games who, on leaving university, tunnel back as quickly as possible into the golden world of youth by returning to those same public schools as masters, and spend the rest of their lives training up new Captains of Games. But my return to Libya was different, partly because at thirty-five I was quite aware of the illusions of twenty, and partly because I came not to Tripolitania, the western province of the country, but to Cyrenaica in the east, which I had never seen before. And in Benghazi I settled down with my family and became part of a Libyan institution, rather than being a single soldier forced by circumstance on to the periphery of Libyan life.

No one has yet written a wholly satisfactory book about Libya: the journals of nineteenth-century and later desert travellers, war memoirs, archaeological monographs, economic and sociological surveys, accounts such as Gwyn Williams's *Green Mountain* and Agnes Newton Keith's *Children of Allah* — many of these give attractive and interesting glimpses but all are in some way narrow and partial. I can't suppose that my own account is any less so, but I hope that at any rate it gives some sense of the feel of this huge and still little-known country, so close to Europe and yet so remote. If there are more ruins than oil-rigs in the book, that is a matter of my own antiquarian tastes; if there seem to be more ruins than *people*, I have little to fall back on but that remark of Rose Macaulay's that she often found ruins more interesting than people. Ignorance dictates my sub-title: this book is an experience, a personal one, and does not set out to be authoritative and definitive.

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