

Regeneration: The Iraq War and "British-Arab" Identity in a Historical Context

Written by Hussein Al-alak

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HUSSEIN AL-ALAK, JAN 31 2008

When debating either the Iraqi or Middle East population within Britain, the first thought that comes to mind is a statement by Leon Trotsky, who once said, "to understand and perceive truly, to feel to the very bottom, the section of time in which we live, one has to know the past of mankind...one has to know the history of mankind, the picturesqueness and the personalities of contemporary life".

Charlotte Higgins, the arts correspondent for the Guardian newspaper reported in 2006 that a Roman document dated from around AD400 and called the Notitia Dignitatum, described how a unit of Iraqis were said to have once patrolled the English northern area of what is now called South Shields. Higgins also explained that "While British soldiers battle it out in Iraq, spare a thought for this: troops from Iraq once occupied Britain."

Historians have claimed that Eastern troops for the Roman Empire also lived and settled around the North East of England, where archers were brought over and settled in close proximity to Hadrian's Wall; certain areas were made to undergo a "name change" to suit its Middle Eastern soldiers.

Some Middle Eastern "personalities", were once described by General George Keppel in 1824, who whilst travelling up the Tigris described a population which "resembled the ancient heroes of Greece and Rome", with Arab boatmen being "hardy and muscular-looking" and that "any of the boatmen would have made an excellent model for a Hercules; and one in particular, with uncombed hair and a shaggy beard, struck us all with the resemblance he bore to statues of that deity."

The BBC reported in June 2006, that "In 1916 the Military Cross was awarded to a captain in the Royal Welch Fusiliers for "conspicuous gallantry during a raid on the enemy's trenches". The citation noted that he had braved "rifle and bomb fire" and that "owing to his courage and determination, all the killed and wounded were brought in".

The "captain" and "hero" in question was the celebrated poet and author Siegfried Sassoon, whose prose are a central feature to many in English literature and whose real life experiences, within the trenches of World War One, were immortalised in the fictional novel "The Regeneration Trilogy" by Durham author Pat Barker.

It is often forgotten that Siegfried Sassoon's family were Sephardic Jews, who had flourished originally within Iraq and his grandfather was the first of his family to have arrived in England in 1858 and had come to Britain as a result of the cotton trade.

In his 2004 paper "The Arab Population in the UK," Dr Ismail al-Jalili explained that about 500,000 Arabs are now resident in the UK but "in the 19th century, Yemeni seamen called Lascars sailed with British ships and many stayed to work in the docks and related industries, or the burgeoning rail network.

"London's East End, Tyneside, Liverpool and Cardiff became centres of small Arab communities. By 1948 there were nearly a thousand Arabs in Tyneside, some marrying local women, thus giving birth to the "British-Arab" identity that many native-born British-Arabs, especially those of mixed ancestry, are now establishing."

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In his paper, Dr. Jalili also explained "the traditional trading skills of Syrians and Lebanese brought them to the industrialised 'Cottonopolis' –Manchester.

Albert Hourani, the Arab historian and author of "A History of the Arab Peoples," was born in Manchester in 1915. His book, published in 1991 has been described by Harvard University Press as being "the definitive story of Arab civilization," which became upon publication "an instant classic."

It is cited on "Wikipedia" that "Hourani trained more academic historians of the modern Middle East than any other university historian of his generation. Today his students can be found on the faculties of Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, Columbia and the University of Haifa, among others."

During the 20th Century, my own relatives lived and worked around coal mining in the North East of England, with one part of the family being based around the Ashington Colliery, which was opened in 1867 and closed in 1986. According to the Durham Mining Museum, the Ashington Colliery employed an estimated 2343 "under ground" workers in 1902, with the number rising to 3997 in 1914. The number then rose again in 1921 to 4076.

Like many other trades, the mines were a central feature to many communities across the northern parts of the United Kingdom, where entire generations of men would be born and raised within a mining community and would later follow their fathers, uncles, brothers etc back down into the pits.

My great-grandfather died of pneumoconiosis in the 1920's, when my grandmother was still a child, a condition brought about by the inhalation of coal dust, as a result of being down the mines. In the early 1990's at my grandmother's funeral in Manchester, her elderly brother and my great uncle, who later died in the year 2000, patted me on the head and asked my mother "when will you teach this lad English?"

Protesting that I already spoke English, my relatives from the North East of England began to laugh as it was explained to me; that according to my uncle, who was "born and bred" in Newcastle, "you will only be Englishman when you speak like a Geordie".

Hussein Al-alak is an Iraqi writer whose articles have been published by the Palestine Chronicle, The UN Observer and the Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq. Hussein is the chairman of the Iraq Solidarity Campaign and director of the Middle East Cultural Association.