



GERALD DE GAURY

THE THREE KINGS IN BAGHDAD

THE TRAGEDY OF
IRAQ'S MONARCHY

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Preface by Philip Mansel
Introduction by Alan de Lacy Rush

Introduction

There scarcely exists on the earth a community of provinces of which the interests and prejudices are more discordant than that for which we have accepted the burden of a mandate.

Perceval Landon, *Daily Telegraph*,
3 May 1921

GERALD de Gaury's *Three Kings in Baghdad*, first published in 1961, challenges the generally negative view of Iraq's kings and their links with Britain. Instead it suggests that, given all the obstacles of which we are now so fully aware, no other regime could have established the Iraqi state more successfully. This view is endorsed by most Iraqis old enough to remember those distant days. For them the overthrow of the monarchy in a *coup d'état* on 14 July 1958 was a tragedy that spawned the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein and Iraq's later crises.

Gerald de Gaury wrote *Three Kings in Baghdad* soon after the *coup*. He received the news through a telephone call to his flat in London. Army rebels had gunned down the Royal Family in the palace garden; Iraq's most powerful political leader, Nuri al Said, had also been killed; Iraq had been declared a republic. While jubilant crowds – including criminals released from prison – dragged the corpse of Crown Prince Abdulillah through Baghdad's streets, de Gaury was appalled by the impending collapse of the state edifice that had taken thirty-seven years to build. He could see that, without the monarchy's centralising influence, Iraq must inevitably revert to the oscillation between dictatorship and ethnic and sectarian violence that had plagued the region since the Mongol destruction of the Abbasid civilisation in

the thirteenth century. It was an historic moment when he felt bound to record what had just become a chapter of Iraq's history.

De Gaury spent most of his working life in Iraq as a soldier, intelligence officer and friend of the Royal Family. Born in London on 13 May 1897, he was the son of a stock-broker, Hubert Stanley de Gaury, and of Hilda Simpson, whose father was a surveyor and land agent. Nothing else is known of his antecedents. Contemporaries suspected that he thought them too dull to mention; others whispered that he was the illegitimate son of the hero of Omdurman, Field Marshal Lord Kitchener. Commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Hampshire Regiment in 1914, he fought at Gallipoli, then in France in the trenches around Arras and the Somme. Wounded four times, he was awarded the Military Cross in 1917.

His passion for the Arab world began while receiving medical treatment at a convent in Malta. Fascinated by an Arabic dictionary by his bedside, he studied the language and persevered until he gained a first-class interpretership in the Civil Service Commission's examination. In Iraq he first served in 1924 as a regular officer under secondment to the Arab Levies. Later, he became an intelligence officer attached to the British Royal Air Force, an assignment involving surveillance of political and tribal developments and liaison duties with the British High Commission and the palace. He also undertook intelligence work in Iran and Saudi Arabia, sometimes travelling in regions previously unvisited by western explorers. In 1935 he and the British Minister visited King Abdul Aziz in Riyadh, and four years later he returned as a special emissary charged with encouraging the King to remain strictly neutral during the Second World War. From 1936 to 1939 he resided in Kuwait as British representative, or Political Agent, charged with monitoring internal affairs and preserving the sheikhdom as an exclusively British preserve. In 1941, he raised a Druze cavalry regiment that helped drive the Vichy French from Syria.

It was soon after arriving in Iraq in 1924 that de Gaury

met its first king, Faisal I (r. 1921–33) son of the head of the Hashimite family, Sherif Hussain of Mecca, who had fought alongside T.E. Lawrence during the Arab Revolt. Needing a bridge partner, the Royal Chamberlain invited him to join in a game with the king and his attractive English companion, the wife of a locally employed British engineer. Palace connections were extended at evening receptions in the Secretariat garden where King Faisal mingled with Iraqi dignitaries, high-ranking visitors and British officials headed by the High Commissioner and Gertrude Bell. In later years, de Gaury, always a romantic, forgot the heat and the mosquitoes, recalling only the lawn with its ‘dusty look against which uniforms, polished buttons, light dresses and a sprinkling of women’s jewellery shone and glimmered doubly luminous’. It was on such an occasion in 1926 that he spoke to King Faisal’s brother, King Ali of the Hijaz, whose ancestral land had recently been conquered and annexed to the territories of Abdul Aziz. In planning a comeback, King Ali needed British support and welcomed de Gaury’s overtures. By the time he died in 1935, his only son, Abdulillah, then aged twenty-three, had become de Gaury’s friend.

Though not a memoir, *Three Kings in Baghdad* is permeated with de Gaury’s memories and observations. The result is a superbly sharp picture tempered by lapses of objectivity. His disparaging presentation of Iraq’s second king, Ghazi (r. 1933–39) clearly reflects Abdulillah’s antagonism towards him. True, King Ghazi was no match for his illustrious father. Promiscuous and a heavy drinker, he threw wild parties and adored aeroplanes and fast cars. But one senses that de Gaury would have forgiven him if he had been an anglophile and had not neglected his wife, Queen Aliya, who was Abdulillah’s sister. Certainly most Iraqis forgave his faults and admired his support for Palestinian rights and Arab unity, and for plans to counter British dominance with German help. De Gaury acknowledges that young Iraqis carried his photograph in their wallets and ‘cheered him wherever he went’. He also concedes that his speeches, broadcast from his private radio station, attracted enthusiastic

audiences not just in Iraq, but in Kuwait, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Yet he dismisses them as mere attempts 'to bemuse the conservative public and upset foreigners'.

Also noteworthy is de Gaury's failure to mention that he was residing in Kuwait as the British Political Agent in 1938 when dissidents there requested King Ghazi's help in removing their despotic ruler, Sheikh Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah, or forcing him to grant reform. Some even wanted Iraq and Kuwait to unite. King Ghazi seemed about to invade when he was killed in a car crash in April 1939. Was the crash a genuine accident, as claimed? Some suspected it had been arranged by the British Secret Service or by the pro-British Prime Minister, Nuri al Said, or both, to prevent an Iraqi takeover of oil-rich Kuwait and remove a pro-German king in the run-up to the Second World War. Others accused King Ghazi's enemies within the palace. De Gaury refutes these well-known suggestions, yet provides none of the extra evidence one might expect from a friend of the Royal Family who occupied a key position at the time. Even when I questioned him years later, he added nothing to his published account. One fact was, however, confirmed by my later research – that de Gaury's removal from Kuwait within weeks of King Ghazi's death resulted directly from his vilification by the previous British Political Agent, H.R.P. Dickson, and other supporters of Sheikh Ahmad, who emerged from the crisis almost unscathed.

De Gaury again skates over thin ice regarding Abdulillah's appointment as regent for King Ghazi's four-year-old son and successor, Faisal II (r. 1939–58). He nowhere mentions what he surely knew – that there was an alternative candidate, the late king's competent uncle, Emir Zaid, who had fought in the Arab Revolt, studied at Oxford and been Iraq's ambassador in Berlin. Nuri al Said hated King Ghazi and more than once asked Zaid to control him or take his place. Although Zaid refused to usurp the throne, his daughter assured me that he would have accepted the regency if Nuri had felt able to oppose Queen Aliya. The choice of her brother, Abdulillah, was in most people's opinion disastrous. As for Nuri's desire to depose Ghazi, it

surely justifies the fears that haunted the king in the months preceding his violent death – fears that de Gaury attributes to hypochondria.

By emphasising the Anglo-Iraqi alliance, de Gaury encourages the notion that the Hashimites were puppets of the British government. In fact, Faisal I, despite his friendly behaviour, infuriated British diplomats by his persistent demands for Iraqi independence – a goal that he achieved, at least on paper, in 1932. As for King Ghazi, he was, as de Gaury admits, an Arab nationalist *par excellence*. Only in the reign of Iraq's third king, Faisal II (1939–58), did the Hashimite monarchy lose its Arab nationalist credentials and become wholly subservient to Britain following a crisis during the Second World War.

In April 1941, a pro-German revolt forced Abdulillah to flee from Iraq to Jerusalem. Soon afterwards, de Gaury, on a secret-service assignment in Tehran, received orders to join him as his *charge d'affaires*. So began the adventure in which British troops and the Arab Legion restored Abdulillah to power in Baghdad.

De Gaury shared all the dangers up to the moment when Abdulillah was reunited with the boy-king, Faisal II, who had been detained in northern Iraq.

Nothing could have delighted de Gaury more than the way this episode clinched his friendship with Abdulillah. For below the veneer of a professional soldier and intelligence officer lurked an ardent royalist and aesthete. In *East is West*, Freya Stark admires de Gaury's sophistication and describes a dream in which he suggested that she should smile less as smiling was 'no longer fashionable'. How could such a man not relish intimacy with an Arab prince of the Hashimite family that had controlled Mecca and Medina for centuries?

Not surprisingly, *Three Kings in Baghdad* provides a more attractive picture of Abdulillah than most people would accept. Effeminate and shy, he appeared arrogant and was never popular. Although he reminded Freya Stark of Shelley, Desmond Stewart, who taught English in Baghdad in the 1950s, found him 'sometimes fawnlike, more often suspicious

and chinless' (Stewart, *New Babylon: A Portrait of Iraq*, 191). Cecil Beaton, found him 'like a dancing instructor', while the ambassador to the Soviet Union and future Warden of New College, Oxford, Sir William Hayter, thought him 'faintly sinister' (Hayter, *A Double Life*, 158). Yet Lord Astor, 'Chips' Channon and many others welcomed him and de Gaury into their country houses and London drawing-rooms. In London, de Gaury helped Abdulillah look for a suitable wife for the young King Faisal and another to replace Abdulillah's beautiful Egyptian wife, Malik, who had returned to Cairo after a boring *mariage blanc*. More to his taste – and de Gaury's – were the handsome young men to whom de Gaury also introduced him.

De Gaury's *Three Kings in Baghdad* is essentially a family story. It includes revealing references to women such as Abdulillah's sisters and his formidable and ambitious mother, ex-Queen Nafisa of the Hijaz. He also draws a moving portrait of the innocent king, Faisal II, destined to be murdered at the age of twenty-three. Despite a cosseted childhood, he had emerged as a capable young man. 'All those about him,' writes de Gaury, 'foresaw a brilliant future'. Longing for him to take his rightful place when he attained his majority in 1953, Iraqis were furious when Abdulillah failed to step aside.

Yet Iraq was progressing well. Despite all the problems and political repression, contemporary accounts support de Gaury's view that Iraq was enjoying an economic and cultural boom and enormous development of its infrastructure thanks to the well-run Development Board and soaring oil revenues. Thus the dangers to the regime lay less in the internal situation than in foreign policy.

De Gaury's friendship with Abdulillah mirrored that between Britain and Iraq. The cordiality seemed splendid at the time. In fact, it isolated the monarchy from the Iraqi people and became an increasing liability. After the overthrow of King Farouq of Egypt in 1952, Gamal Abdel Nasser, as second president of the new republic, denounced Iraq's membership of the pro-western, defensive organisation, the Baghdad Pact, and became the hero of the Arab

masses by nationalising the Suez Canal in July 1956. When Britain, France and Israel retaliated by invading Egypt, international uproar and humiliating troop withdrawals highlighted Britain's decline as an imperial power. Clearly it was urgent for the Iraqi regime to seek local support. Instead Abdulillah and Nuri al Said relied on martial law and remained defiantly pro-British.

De Gaury omits to mention Abdulillah's meddling in Syrian politics. His father's kingdom of the Hijaz was now part of Saudi Arabia. The Hashimite throne of Jordan was held by his cousin, King Hussain, and being more than twenty years older than Faisal II, he was unlikely ever to become king of Iraq despite being Crown Prince. He therefore aimed to revive the Hashimite monarchy in Syria where his uncle, Faisal I, had briefly ruled before being evicted by French forces and moving to Baghdad in 1921. Nuri al Said mocked this aspiration, but wanted to stifle Egyptian influence in Damascus. Both men therefore conspired with Syrian royalists and opportunists, American, British and Turkish diplomats and anti communist operatives, often behind the façade of Baghdad Pact meetings. Opposition to their machinations provoked the union of Egypt and Syria in February 1958 which in turn triggered the formation of the rival Hashimite Federation of Iraq and Jordan. These conspiracies figure in Patrick Seale's classic work, *The Struggle for Syria*, and in files held in British and French government archives and in the Bureau de Documentations Arabes in Damascus. Why then are they not mentioned in *Three Kings in Baghdad?* Was de Gaury unaware of them? Perhaps he knew but kept silent, knowing how greatly they antagonised Iraq's Free Officers and contributed to their decision to destroy the monarchy.

In his last years de Gaury lived in an elegant regency square in Brighton and mixed with a social set that included the playwright, Terence Rattigan, writers such as Robin Maugham and Derek Patmore, the artist Count William de Belleroche and his friend Gordon Anderson, plus others with whom he had more in common than he dared to admit. There were also visitors from London and the continent,

including his devoted friend, Princess Eugenie of Greece, daughter of Freud's disciple, Marie Bonaparte. Active to the end, he painted excellent watercolours and added an auto-biographical volume, *Traces of Travel* (1983), to earlier classic works including *Arabia Phoenix* (1946), *Arabian Journey* (1950) and *Rulers of Mecca* (1951).

After de Gaury's death in January 1984, his papers proved to have been well 'weeded'. Despite his writings, he was a secretive man who took many unanswered questions to his grave. Nevertheless, in *Three Kings in Baghdad*, he casts a brilliant light on a forgotten corner of Britain's vast realm of imperial influence in the twentieth century.

Alan de Lacy Rush