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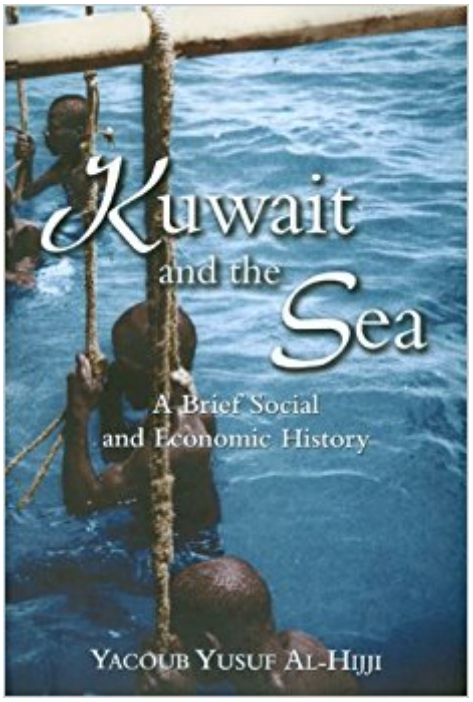
Kuwait And The Sea: A Brief Social And Economic History



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Synopsis

Though inhabited for millennia, Kuwait began to emerge as an Arab shaikhdom relatively late. Entering the historical record during the early 18th century as a junction of caravan and sea routes, it quickly grew to be a commercial rival to Basra at the head of the Gulf. As its prosperity increased, it had to negotiate a precarious autonomy amongst its larger neighbours - the Ottomans in Iraq, the Saudis and Rashidis in central Arabia, and the British who, from 1820, set about establishing an effective maritime peace in the Gulf. By the end of the 19th century, despite their complete lack of natural resources of any kind, even water, Kuwait's people had managed to exploit their geopolitical position to turn their town into the busiest dhow port on the Gulf. Its greatest ruler, Mubarak Al-Sabah (r. 1896-1915), deftly manipulated Turkey and the European powers to achieve both British protection and, by 1914, sovereignty for his tiny state. Without the sea, Kuwait's rise would have been impossible. Its society was formed by the trade in Iraqi dates, and by its dhow-building and pearling industries, which attracted both Arabs and Persians to the town. Focusing chiefly on the first decades of the 20th century, Yacoub Al-Hijji paints a vivid portrait of the merchants, captains, navigators, dhow builders, sailors, pearl divers and fishermen of this remarkable shaikhdom. In explaining their techniques, and analysing how they organized themselves according to the customary law and traditions of a tribal, pre-bureaucratic era, he conveys a compelling picture of the bustle and hardships of a way of life which, during the 1940s and 1950s, was to be erased by prosperity from oil.

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Customer Reviews

Kuwait and the Sea takes up an important position on the shelf of both Middle East and Indian Ocean historiography.' (Farah Al-Nakib The Middle East in London, Vol 19 1900-01-00)...both scholarly and highly readable.[...]The book fills an important gap in the economic history of the Arabian Gulf before oil, a subject that Dr Al Hijji notes has largely been ignored in Western literature on the Gulf.' (Claudia Farkas Al Rashoud Arab Times 1900-01-00)The book is undoubtedly useful for those interested in Kuwaiti or Gulf maritime history...' (Thabit A.J. Abdullah, York University International Journal of Maritime History 1900-01-00)

Dr Yacoub Yusuf Al-Hijji was born in old Kuwait City in 1947, and attended the American University of Beirut. Returning to Kuwait, he joined the government groundwater department as a geologist. Furthering his studies at University College, London, he then went to the United States, attaining his M.Sc. in hydrogeology from Ohio University, and his Ed.D. from Boston University. In 1983 he joined Kuwait University as faculty member. He currently works as a consultant at the Centre for Research and Studies on Kuwait (CRSK). Dr Al-Hijji is an authority on Kuwait's rich maritime heritage, and now devotes much of his time to its study. He has written several articles and books about it, in both Arabic and English, among them The Voyage of Al-Ghazeer and The Art of Dhow Building in Kuwait.

We know the Kuwait that oil built, today's ultramodern "city state." But few of us know the Kuwait before oil: essentially a tiny, walled town called al-Qurain, surrounded by desert, bereft of natural resources, which turned to the sea and built a prospering economy based on the fruits of the Gulf and a long-distance maritime trade that extended to East Africa and the Indian subcontinent.Dr. Al-Hijji trained as a geologist specializing in water resources. He is now recognized as an expert on Kuwait's maritime history. He traces his interest to his childhood, growing up beside the Kuwait city waterfront. He spent many years researching this book - interviewing nakhodas (ship captains), merchants, mariners and shipbuilders.The author paints a vivid picture of a very different world. It was a parched environment, where life-giving supplies of fresh water had to be drawn from the Shatt al-Arab waterway and brought to Kuwait in great wooden tanks aboard even greater dhows.Before oil, jobs were hard to find. Almost all the able-bodied men in the town signed up as pearl divers, for four long summer months, harvesting oysters in the hope of recovering gem-quality pearls. Pearl-diving has been romanticized in recent years, but the author disabuses us of this notion. It was a "season in hell," he says, with divers working through the blazing heat, taking ten dives in a row without a break, continuing their shifts from daybreak to sunset, from June to

September.Pearling was a pillar of the Kuwaiti economy, but when the discovery of oil brought better jobs and the imperial Asian markets for pearls dried up, the industry shriveled and died.Another pillar was the long-distance dhow trade. The big dhows, the boums and baghlahs, enjoyed a final burst of prosperity when World War II temporarily halted European freighter traffic to Asia, but after the war, the steel ships returned and era of the wooden dhows came to an end.Al-Hijji captures the unique flavor of this bygone age, and provides facts, figures and illustrations to sate the appetites of the most curious.[A version of this review appeared in Saudi Aramco World, Mar/Apr 2011.]

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