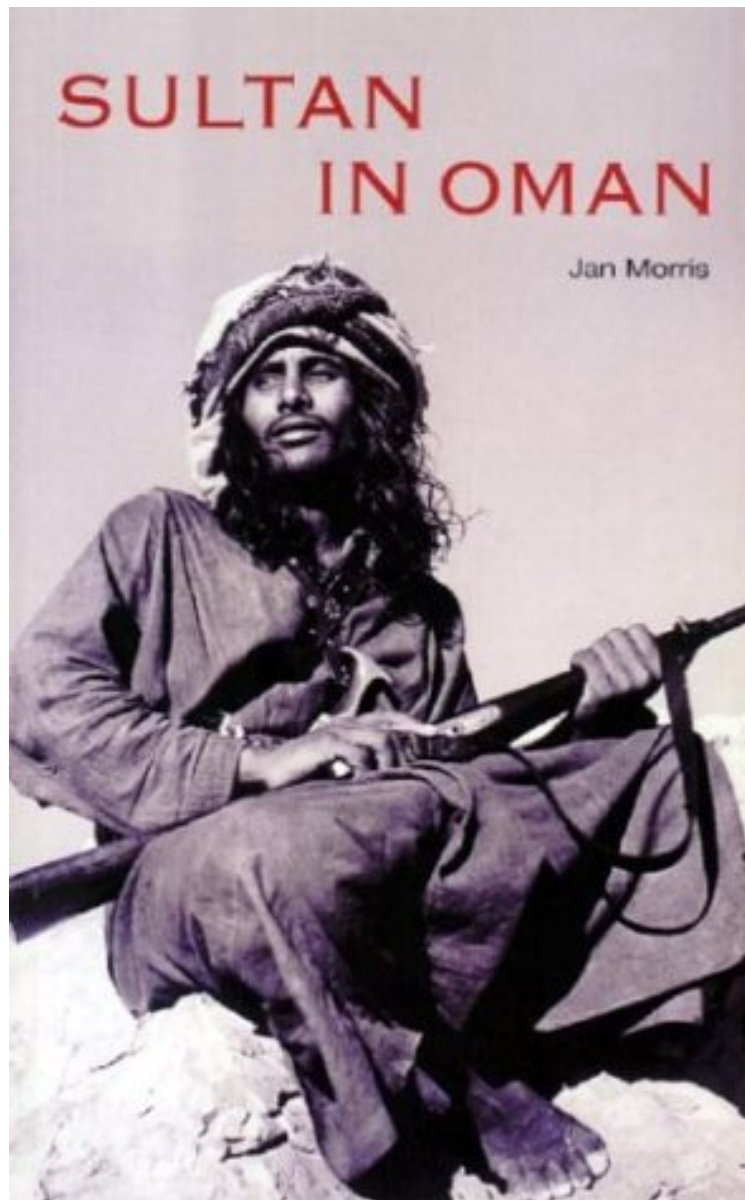


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## Sultan in Oman

*Jan Morris*

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**Jan Morris : Sultan in Oman** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Sultan in Oman:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. The preposition in the title is keyBy John P. Jones IIIbecause it is not the normal of, but rather, in.I recently read two other works of Jan Morris (ne: James): Trieste And The Meaning

Of Nowhere and Conundrum (New York Review Books Classics), the latter describes the journey from one first name to the other. Among other achievements in his/her life, as a reporter, Morris was the first one to race down Mount Everest with the scoop that Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay were the first humans to reach the summit in 1953. This book represents another first, of sorts. Morris accompanied Sultan Said bin Taimur, of Muscat, on the first motorized crossing of southeastern Arabia, from the south coast at Salalah, across the very barren Jaddat al Harasis, with a side trip to Nizwa and Jebel Akhdar (the Green Mountain), and on to the disputed Buraimi Oasis and then to the Sohar, on the Gulf of Oman, and down the coast to his home, and capital, Muscat. This journey occurred in December, 1955. And the significance of the preposition? Today, Muscat is the capital of Oman. But in 1955, they were, sorta, two different places. Nominally, the Sultan ruled the entire country, but neither he nor his predecessors had been in the interior during the 20th century. Rather, they ruled the various coastal enclaves, and the interior, with its capital at Nizwa, was ruled by a very conservative Imam. And if one is attempting to extract that magic elixir of the 20th century, namely oil, as the British were doing at Fahud, the fussiness of sovereignty proved to be an enormous inconvenience, to put it mildly. So, with some British-officered native forces, they drove the Imam from power, with apparently only one shot being fired. The December, 1955 trip was a victory lap for the Sultan, and he invited Morris along to document it. Salalah is one of the more fascinating places on the Arabian Peninsula since a small portion of the monsoon that waters India touches it commencing in August of each year. Normally the weather is misty and overcast, and the surrounding crescent of plains and mountains lush green. It is from this area that another elixir, frankincense, which was sought by the Roman Empire, two millennium earlier, brought much prosperity to the region. From Salalah, the convoy raced (and that does seem to be the operative word) across the roadless wastes of Jaddat al Harasis, which is a hard 12-hour drive on asphalt. It took them three days. Morris says little about the logistical arrangements of such a trip, but does mention that the oil company had prepositioned oil and water along the route for the Sultan's convenience. The Sultan entered Nizwa, with its famous round fort, and without the Imam, apparently unconcerned about the possibility of a few unrepentant supporters of the ancien regime. Naturally he was well-received by the oil community at Fahud, and Morris describes the expat lifestyle there that was so similar to Aramcos in Dhahran. Buraimi is a true anomaly, contested by three different countries, Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi, and Oman. The Americans backed the former, the British backed the latter two, and somehow it was peacefully resolved, the latter two literally splitting the nine villages of the oasis 6 to 3. From Buraimi, the convoy raced on to a warm reception in the agricultural settlements along the Batinah coast, and then back to Muscat, which closed its gates at night, just like a medieval village when Morris was there. The author is a good observer, and admits he knew virtually nothing about the country before undertaking the trip. For Morris, the Pax Britannica glass is more than half full. As she says in the acknowledgments: If there is a flavor of the 1920s to this list, an aroma of open cockpits, Rolls-Royce armored cars, proconsuls and spheres of influence, it is because our adventure was one of the last of a line, a late flourish of Britain in Arabia the ghosts of Curzon and Gertrude Bell rode with us approvingly. And that perspective mars this account, as evidenced by such statements: There are queer subtleties in the mind of the Semite, and their ponderous muskets to fight out their ridiculous squabbles. How easily the Somme seems to be forgotten. In December, 1997 I drove from Riyadh to the UAE, and on to (united) Oman, camping for three glorious days on the beach south of Muscat. I made the very large circuit around the Jebel Akhdar, back to the Buraimi Oasis, where one drives down a city street with signs alternating, telling you that you have just entered Oman, and then the UAE. My big regret is not having driven to Salalah. But there is a fundamental problem that the best time to be there, August, is the worse time to drive those terribly boring 12 hours. I found Oman fascinatingly different from the surrounding countries, much more orderly, a bit of Denmark on the peninsula, where people obey the speed limit, and drive much safer. And a major reason for this is Sultan Qaboos, who overthrew his father, the man Morris accompanied, in 1970, and modernized the country in a prudent and rational way. (And he is STILL the ruler, almost a half century later.) 4-stars for Morris fascinating accounting of an unusual time and place. 10 of 11 people found the following review helpful. More of a travelogue than anything else... By E.R. Sullivan In an effort to increase regional knowledge in advance of an assignment in Oman, I bought this book together with several others to augment knowledge gained in an earlier visit to the Sultanate in '03. The book is short and set in 1955, and is essentially the diary of a traveler accompanying the Sultan's traveling party on a historic journey through the country at the end of a brief civil war. While interesting in parts, the trip was done at break-neck pace and therefore true insights on the country are limited. While an interesting snapshot in time, the book nonetheless was something of a disappointment. I expected to get a book which would really paint a solid picture of the country prior to the reign of Sultan Qaboos. In a way this does have elements of that, but it is more aimed at the romantic traveler than it is a student of the country or its history.

In 1955 the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman, southeast of Saudi Arabia on the Arabian Sea, was a truly medieval Islamic State, shuttered against all progress under the aegis of its traditionalist and autocratic ruler. But it was also nearly the end of an imperial line, for in those days the British Government was still powerful in Arabia. Rumors of subversion and the intrigues of foreign powers mingled with the unsettling smell of oil to propel the sultan on a royal progress across the desert hinterland. It was an historic journey--the first crossing of the Omani desert by motorcar. Jan

Morris accompanied His Highness as a professional observer, and was inspired by the experience to write her major work of imperial history. The Pax Britannica Trilogy. The author of some forty books, Welshman Jan Morris has established herself as one of the great modern travel authors. Originally published in 1957 (Faber and Faber) and now back in print.

"Jan Morris is perhaps the best descriptive writer of our time." --abc