



Cool for Qat: A Yemeni Journey: Two Countries, Two Times

Peter Mortimer

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When author Peter Mortimer was commissioned to write a play about a little-known riot between Yemeni and British seamen at Mill Dam, South Shields, in 1930, he decided to take the long trip to Yemen itself in search of inspiration. Undeterred by post-11 September government warnings against visiting this 'highly dangerous' area, Mortimer set off and found an extraordinary and surprisingly Anglophile country.

Cool for Qat documents this remarkable journey, during which Mortimer pieces together how the riots of 1930 arose and considers their relevance to Western attitudes towards Muslims today. He meets many remarkable characters along the way and immerses himself in the national custom of chewing the narcotic qat leaf.

After visiting the ex-British Protectorate of Aden - through which many of the seamen passed en route to Britain - Mortimer travels on to San'a and then Tai'iz. It is while visiting the isolated mountain villages surrounding this city that Mortimer finally meets men who worked in South Shields some 50 years ago. Carrying a battered book with images of Yemenis living in the North-east in the '30s from home to home, trying to jog distant memories, he realises his visit has taken on a new purpose - bringing a small part of the country's history back to where it belongs.

Back in the UK, Mortimer's investigations into the 1930 riot reveal a society with many striking similarities to current times. Then, as now, Muslim immigrants were treated as scapegoats for all manner of ills, tabloid newspapers drummed up prejudice and hatred, and the powers that be often used fear and racial mistrust to disguise their own economic failings.

Cool for Qat questions just how 'civilised' the Western world - and Britain in particular - is in comparison to Yemen. It is a touching, thought-provoking and at times humorous document of one man's travels through a country about which little is known in the West.

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