

The SLS and the modern history of Libya

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Abstract

The Society for Libyan Studies has been in the forefront of research and writing on the modern history of Libya. The example was set by the first president of the society, Sir Duncan Cumming. Following the defeat of Axis forces in North Africa in 1942–43, he was closely involved with the British military administration of Libya. In this role he was instrumental in establishing local self-government and lobbying for Libyan independence, finally achieved in 1951. In retrospect it is clear that he also laid the groundwork for the study of the emergence of Libya as a modern state. Historians and members of the SLS, such as John Wright, have followed suit and have made major contributions through their books and articles to our understanding of the history of Libya. Long may this continue.

إن جمعية الدراسات الليبية في طليعة البحث العلمي والكتابة عن تاريخ ليبيا الحديث. وقد وضع هذا المنهج من قبل أول رئيس للجمعية، السير دنكان كومينج. فبعد هزيمة قوات المحور في شمال أفريقيا في 1942–1943، كان السير دنكان كومينج مشارك بشكل وثيق في الإدارة العسكرية البريطانية لليبيا. حيث كان له دور فعال في تأسيس الحكم الذاتي المحلي وكذلك الضغط من أجل استقلال ليبيا، الذي تحقق في نهاية المطاف في عام 1951. و بنظرة فاحصة للماضي يبدو من الواضح أيضا إنه من وضع الأساس لدراسة نشأة ليبيا كدولة حديثة. وقد حذا حذوه المؤرخون وأعضاء جمعية الدراسات الليبية، مثل جون رايت، وقدموا مساهمات كبيرة لغرض فهمنا لتاريخ ليبيا من خلال كتبهم ومقالاتهم. و نأمل بان يستمر هذا النشاط.

Historians are a rare breed among the archaeologists and geographers who extensively populate the Society for Libyan Studies (SLS). But they are to be seen on occasions at meetings and conferences of the Society. A leaf through the pages of the house journal, *Libyan Studies*, shows that they have been periodically active, through their articles and reviews, in furthering our knowledge of the history of Libya. The example was set by the very first president of the SLS, Sir Duncan Cumming, with his studies of James Bruce in Libya in 1766 and Jeremy Bentham's consideration of a constitution for Tripoli in 1823 (Cumming 1970; 1972). They showed Cumming's interest in the British encounter with Libya and the question of governance. This was no accident of scholarship. He had had a long association with Libya. As a former officer of the Sudan Political Service, Cumming had been selected to head up the British military administration of Cyrenaica in late 1942, as the Eighth Army drove the Axis forces back through Libya to Tunisia. Cumming was

confronted with a grim task. The coastal towns of Cyrenaica had been blasted by war and were largely uninhabitable, with little in the way of housing, utilities and food supplies. The hinterland presented only a slightly better picture with Arab pastoralists and agriculturists having barely sufficient resources to survive, their herds having been decimated and their crops having been poor. As Cumming pointed out to his political officers, Britain was faced with a difficult problem in Cyrenaica. Under international law, conquered territories had to be run on a care and maintenance basis until their future was determined by a peace conference. Britain had, perforce, to continue to recognise Italian sovereignty over the country, yet the Italian population had fled and the Arabs were not enemies of Britain. Far from it. The exiled leader of the Cyrenaican Arabs and head of the Sanusi brotherhood, Sayyid Idris, had given his support to Britain during the summer of 1940. This was after the fall of France and Italy's declaration of war that led to the invasion of Egypt. It was against this background, and the subsequent campaigns in the Western Desert and Cyrenaica that Sayyid Idris had helped raise the two battalions of the Libyan Arab Force that had served with the Eighth Army. Moreover, Sanusi tribesmen provided intelligence to the British military on the movements of Axis forces and gave sanctuary to downed RAF fliers and stray soldiers. It was in recognition of this that the British foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, had in January 1942 given Sayyid Idris an assurance that the Sanusis would not be returned to Italian rule. Cumming made clear to his officers that they would have to provide 'good government' (Kelly 2010, 160). The Arabs expected that Britain would establish a sovereignty acceptable to the people and reward them for their war effort, even though British actions would be restricted by international law and a lack of supplies. Cumming, who often made literary allusions in his memoranda, found apposite Sir Francis Bacon's remark that: 'If you plant where savages are, do not entertain them with trifles and gingles, but use them justly and graciously with sufficient guard nevertheless' (Kelly 2010, 155). In the winter of 1942–43, Cumming and his officers began removing the vestiges of Italian rule from Cyrenaica and developing local Arab rural and municipal government.

This involved restoring responsibility for tribal affairs to the paramount shaikhs and setting up a municipal council of town notables in Benghazi under Sayyid Abu al-Qasim al-Sanusi, a cousin of Sayyid Idris. Cumming also began to establish a local civil service, staffed by Arabs. This all had to be kept quiet in case Britain was accused of trying to pre-determine the peace settlement.

With hindsight it can be seen that Cumming was establishing the basis of not only Cyrenaican but eventually Libyan self-government. But it was to be a long-time coming. Cumming remarked in 1943 that: 'Cyrenaica will be incapable of supporting itself as a purely Arab state and no country that must satisfy its strategic requirements by controlling the eastern Mediterranean and Egypt can afford to see it under the control of any other interested and potentially hostile power. One cannot forget the post-war settlement, but assuming that Britain, or some league in which Britain is a leading partner, continues to control the strategic danger zones, it is reasonable to suppose that naval and air bases will be established in Cyrenaica. The future of the country may, therefore, be under British influence in some form or other' (Kelly 2010, 163). This, indeed, proved to be the case. It is clear from the documentary record that Cumming played a key behind-the-scenes role in pressing the cause of Libyan independence upon the British government, during the latter's negotiations with the other great powers for a settlement of this question (Kelly 2000, 46, 58, 73–4, 78, 83, 94). Cumming's efforts were rewarded in 1951 when Libya became an independent state under King Idris. British influence in the country only waned with the advent to power of Muammar al-Ghaddafi in 1969. It would have been interesting to know what Cumming thought of this development, which was contemporaneous with his presidency of the SLS.

Sir Duncan Cumming is an example of someone who made history in Libya but he also wrote about its past, as we have noted (see Cumming 1970; 1972). Others followed his latter example and wrote on a variety of subjects. The School of Oriental and African Studies was especially well-represented. Michael Brett (Brett 1974; 1976; 1978) and Keith McLachlan (1978) contributed articles to *Libyan Studies* on medieval and early modern

Tripoli, while George Joffe (1984; 1990) offered his thoughts on political and diplomatic developments in the nineteenth century. However, the *palme d'or* must be awarded to John Wright who has contributed more to our knowledge of the modern history of Libya than anyone else. John's *Libya. A Modern History*, first published in 1969 and reissued several times, is the standard and most accessible historical work on Libya. He followed this up with his topical study of *Libya, Chad and the Central Sahara* (1989), *Travellers in Libya* (published by the SLS's Silphium Press, 2005) *The Trans-Saharan Slave Trade* (2007), *The Emergence of Libya* (SLS's Silphium Press, 2008), *Travellers in Turkish Libya, 1555–1911* (SLS's Silphium Press, 2011) and *Tripoli. A History* (2015), plus a number of articles in *Libyan Studies* (1983; 1998; 2005, 2007). John has set a fine example to aspiring historians as to how to combine rigorous scholarship with a clarity of prose which holds the attention of the reader. I was certainly influenced by him in writing *Cold War in the Desert* (2000), *The Hunt for Zorzura* (2002) and *War and Politics in the Desert* (SLS's Silphium Press, 2010). War and exploration seem to have grabbed the attention of SLS historians in the last two decades. Russell McGuirk has written two studies of the First World War as it affected Libya: *The Sanusi's Little War* (2007) and *The Light Car Patrols* (SLS's Silphium Press, 2015). Andrew Goudie has contributed *Wheels Across the Desert* (SLS's Silphium Press, 2008) and *Great Desert Explorers* (SLS's Silphium Press, 2016). And Richard Synge, using his father's wartime diaries, has published *Operation Idris. The British Administration of Cyrenaica and Libya, 1945–52* (SLS's Silphium Press, 2015). Thus, we come full circle to where we started with Sir Duncan Cumming, the first president of the SLS. It shows that the period of the direct British involvement with Libya, from 1942 to 1969, has sparked an interest in the modern history of the country which has been reflected in the publications of those historians who are members of the SLS. Long may this interest continue.

Note

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