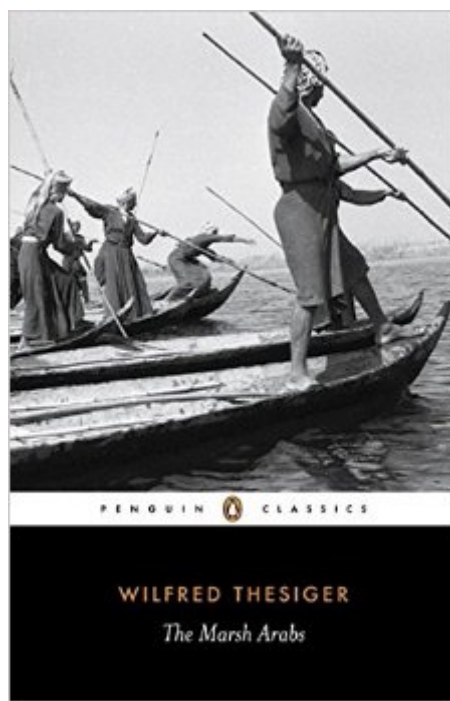


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The Marsh Arabs (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

During the years he spent among the Marsh Arabs of southern Iraq Wilfred Thesiger came to understand, admire and share a way of life that had endured for many centuries. Travelling from village to village by canoe, he won acceptance by dispensing medicines and treating the sick. In this account of his time there he pays tribute to the hospitality, loyalty, courage and endurance of the people, describes their impressive reed houses, the waterways and lakes teeming with wildlife, the herding of buffalo and hunting of wild boar, moments of tragedy and moments of pure comedy, all in vivid, engaging detail. Untouched by the modern world until recently, these independent people, their way of life and their surroundings have suffered widespread destruction under the regime of Saddam Hussein. Wilfred Thesiger's magnificent account of his time spent among them is a moving testament to their now threatened culture and the landscape they inhabit. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

Wilfred Thesiger led an amazing life. He was one of those Englishmen who are happiest when living far away from the comforts of modern life in dangerous surroundings with seemingly "primitive"

people. Following many years living with the Bedu of the Empty Quarter, Thesiger traveled to Iraq to immerse himself in the life and culture of the Marsh Arabs. What he found was a fusion of Arabic/Islamic culture into a older life style which had existed for well over three thousand years, hunting and gathering within the Marshes which form the end of the Tigris and Euphrates river systems. What he found was a culture which was rich in protocols and customs, no less advanced than that of modern man, but rather a culture superbly adapted to the life within the marshes, a culture whose key feature of hospitality which is seemingly lacking from our modern life. And ultimately he finds the tragedy of a society which in the short term was being subsumed by western value and greed for possessions and which would ultimately be destroyed by a dictatorial government who would drain the Marshes in retribution for the locals support of an attempted coup.

Wilfred Thesiger (1910-2003) was one of those Englishmen who spent most of his adult life in the third world, living as the natives do, and documenting his experiences and their lives. In his life he published many books about Africa, Arabia, and the Middle East, and it is unlikely the two best-selling ones, *ARABIAN SANDS* (1959) and *THE MARSH ARABS* (1964) will go out of print in the foreseeable future. *THE MARSH ARABS* takes place in the southern quadrant of Iraq, where Thesiger spent most of his time between 1951 and 1958. The area at that time consisted of almost a complete network of swamps with the Tigris bisecting it and the Euphrates undergirding it, and included numerous tributaries and some man-made channels and canals. All the inhabitants spoke Arabic, but not all were ethnically Arab, and certain tribes and sub-tribes lived in an uneasy enmity with others. The most secluded of the marshland tribes were virtually self-sustaining, living in semi-permanent housing made of tall reeds and bulrushes, traversing the area in canoes for which only the wood had to be imported. Some groups fished with spears, some with a low-level poison that stunned the fish -- only the lowest groups on the social ladder used nets. Tribes nearer the edge of the marsh and closer to transportation were better integrated into the Dinar economy, and often sold herringbone-weave mats made of rushes and reeds. But the region as a whole enjoyed near-total political autonomy: most matters of crime and punishment, of apportionment of land for rice-farming and sharing of crops with owners were overseen by local sheikhs. In this period only capital murder and mandatory conscription came under the control of the government, and those not in all cases. As he did all his career, Thesiger lived with all the marshland Arabs as one of them, sharing their housing, learning their social rituals, kinship patterns and religious observances, admiring how nimbly the natives handled the native canoes in all manner of wetlands, then moving on. He even took on several teenaged boys as oarsmen and traveling companions and (wisely) paid

the young men enough to keep them well, but not a fixed salary so that it would be their pleasure to serve him. In all things Thesiger proved intrepid. Although he had had no formal medical training, it fell to him as an educated Englishman to perform medicine on every group he and his entourage visited, especially the ritual circumcisions so central to Moslem life. While Thesiger suffered along with the others the routine ailments of mosquitoes and water-borne illnesses, hot steamy summers and windy, rainy winters, he also delighted in their delights -- a crack shot, he enjoyed tracking down the varied waterfowl and boars that ate the local crops and terrified the residents. (Because of Moslem dietary restrictions, no one could eat those wild pigs.) Even in the Fifties the marshes were being slowly drained due to irrigation projects, and Thesiger bemoaned the loss of some of the area's young men to an inferior education that would alienate them from their subsistence backgrounds yet send them to big cities like Baghdad and Basra ill-equipped for anything more than menial work. The real cultural genocide got going under dictator Saddam Hussein, in the 1990s, with the deliberate draining of the marshes, a sad epilog to Thesiger's narrative detailed by Jon Lee Anderson in his 2007 Introduction to this book. Ostensibly Saddam did this to improve living standards but more likely to crush a way of life that had enjoyed its semi-autonomy from the Iraqi central government. This was also a signal ecocide of an area many had considered to be the original model for the Garden of Eden, a kind of terrain and lifestyle rare on our planet. Since Saddam's fall and execution, engineers have been busy trying to restore this one-of-a-kind region, but it is expected that the restored marshland will be no more than thirty percent the size it was when Thesiger lived there in the Fifties. *THE MARSH ARABS* is a classic book among a relative handful that deal with the inhabitants of a region that has not been as well documented as some other Middle Eastern climes such as the empty-quarter desert. Along with Anderson's sad but detailed Introduction, several interior maps are quite helpful and Thesiger, a crack photographer as well as shot, supplies over 100 beautiful and documentary black-and-white photos for the book. Highly recommended, whether your pleasure is anthropology, ecology, history, or just the kind of armchair fun to be had when Englishmen head out into the noontday sun and write about it.

Thesiger's account of his visits to the marshlands in the 1950s and early 1960s, though perhaps not as well written as his crossing of the empty quarter or Gavin Maxwell's own account of the Iraqi marshlands, still remains a classic of modern exploration literature. His presage about what would soon happen to the marshes and their inhabitants is haunting, for as Nik Wheeler (photographer in Gavin Young's "Return to the Marshes") recently wrote in my "Wetlands of Mass Destruction: Ancient Presage for Contemporary Ecocide in Southern Iraq": "Wilfred Thesiger was unfortunately

quite prescient when he wrote in the mid-sixties that 'Recent political upheavals in Iraq have closed this area to visitors. Soon the Marshes will probably be drained; when this happens, a way of life that has lasted for thousands of years will disappear.'" And tragically, it has.

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