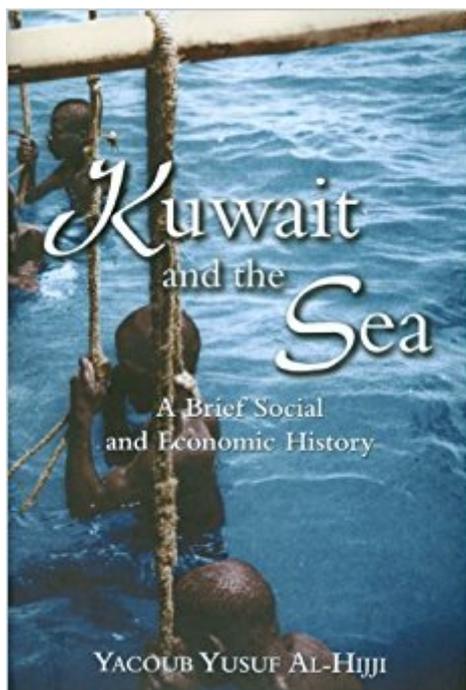


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Kuwait And The Sea: A Brief Social And Economic History



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

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. Pearl-diving 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.

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