

Oman and Britain: 220 years

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had a first career in the British Foreign Service, serving in Saudi Arabia and in Cairo, and then as Ambassador in Muscat (2002-05), and later in Kuwait (2005-08). He was then Master of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge (2008-2018), and now researches and writes on Arab and East African history. He is co-author of a book on Omani-British history, *Unshook till the End of Time*, and has published a biography of Tippu Tip, the Arab-African ivory trader.

General Sir John Malcolm, Governor of Bombay. He was nicknamed 'Boy Malcolm' for his youthful looks, not apparent in this portrait of him in mature years by an unknown artist

Picture by courtesy of Annan Museum, Dumfries and Galloway, reference ANNMS:90

In this publication we celebrate with admiration the life and achievements of His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id; and at the same time we look back on the 220 years of close relations between Britain and Oman, since the Agreement of January 1800 which contained the famous and poetic aspiration that "... *the friendship between the two States may remain unshook till the end of time, and till the sun and moon have finished their revolving careers.*"

As a former professional diplomat, I can express only regret that we have lost the art of using such imaginative language in international treaties in the present age!

The 1800 Agreement was signed at a time when both the British Government and the Ruler in Muscat

had particular reasons for protecting their maritime interests and ensuring stability in the northern Indian Ocean. In this article I shall look at the context of that signature, and at a few other important moments in the life – so far – of this important relationship, and see how far the parties to it have lived up to the 1800 promise of eternal friendship.

First contacts between Britain and Oman go back well before 1800, in fact to the period following the foundation of the East India Company in 1600. As English vessels began trading to India and Persia, they looked for suitable locations for trading posts and depôts (known as '*factories*'), and wanted naturally to ensure safety – from pirates, or from commercial competitors such as the Portuguese on their trading

routes. The Portuguese, having first invaded the coast of Oman in the early 16th century, were still in occupation, and were attacked by the Persians and then driven out by the Omanis in 1649. It was about this time, actually in 1646, that the first written British-Omani agreement was signed, between an official of the East India Company and the people of Sohar (see end-note)*. Negotiations for a similar agreement with the Imam in Muscat were not concluded, although the Company's ships regularly called there.

From the start, then, British interests in the Gulf in general, and Oman in particular, were seen through the perspective of India. This trend was strengthened as the British expanded their presence in India itself through the 18th century, fighting off rivals such as the Dutch and the French. Later they joined forces with the rulers in Muscat, as Omani maritime traders had shared interests in security and stability in the northern Indian Ocean.

And this was the context in which the 1800 '*Unshook*' treaty was signed. Oman had been suffering from destructive civil wars and a Persian occupation, from which Ahmad bin Sa'id, the founder of the al-Busa'idi dynasty, emerged as



victor and liberator. The British had been engaged in heavy fighting in India (as well as elsewhere) in the Seven Years' War, and were reeling from the shock of the loss of the American colonies in the War of Independence (1775-1783), which had the effect of making retention of the Indian possessions all the more important. Rivalry with the French continued after the French Revolution (1789 onwards), including in Muscat, where the al-Busa'idi rulers hoped to maintain neutrality between the two major European powers. The British needed to edge out the French, secure communication with India now being vital, and in 1798 the Governor of Bombay sent a Persian employee of the Company to Muscat to negotiate permission for a 'factory', mutual friendship, and the expulsion of French (and also Dutch) traders and vessels.* The 1800 Agreement came about because the Governor-General in Calcutta, who had taken over responsibility for Gulf and Arab affairs from the Governor in Bombay, was concerned that Sayyid Sultan bin Ahmad, the Ruler in Muscat, was backsliding from his 1798 commitments. He sent John Malcolm, then a young captain, with a large entourage designed to impress, to bring Sayyid Sultan firmly round to the British side. In this he was entirely successful, and the first British Political Agent soon took up residence in Muscat.*

After Sayyid Sultan was killed in battle a few years later, a succession dispute broke out among the al-Busa'idis, from which his son Sa'id emerged as Ruler. Sa'id bin Sultan reigned from 1806 until his death in 1856, a fifty-year period during which he brought his country out of turbulence to prosperity, and maintained a strong and (mostly) friendly relationship with the British. In all these respects, comparison with His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos is tempting.

The first episode in which the friendship was to be tested was in the wars aimed at ending piracy in the Gulf. Sayyid Sa'id faced enemies in the shape of Arabs from the Nejd in central Arabia (usually referred to as Wahhabis, from their religious leader Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab), who at various times encroached on his northern and western borders; and the Qawasim from what is now the United Arab Emirates, who attacked Omani shipping (or, according to another interpretation, used force to exact tolls on ships transiting their waters). The British, also concerned to maintain free (and toll-free) navigation

in the Gulf, joined forces with those of Sayyid Sa'id in two campaigns, in 1809 and 1819, to bring the Qawasim to heel. The outcome was a 'General Treaty' establishing a 'lasting peace' between Britain and the tribes of the Gulf, which can be seen as a precursor of the Truce of 1835 that gave rise to the coast from Abu Dhabi to Ras al-Khaimah becoming known as the Trucial Coast.

If joint action against piracy brought Britain and Sayyid Sa'id into collaboration, the issue of slavery and the slave trade was more contentious. After William Wilberforce's Act of 1807 which made illegal the trading of slaves in British ships and British ports, UK governments responded to public opinion in seeking to pressurise others to end slavery. A prime target was Sayyid Sa'id, whose countrymen – and whose own ships – brought slaves to the Gulf and elsewhere from the market in Zanzibar. By this time Omani settlements were well established on the East African coast, to the extent that in about 1840 Sayyid Sa'id moved his court and main residence to Zanzibar. He mainly resisted the attempts to force on him the ending of the slave trade (slaves being essential to the clove and spice plantations

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The great Sultan Sayyid Sa'id, Ruler from 1806 to 1856. Picture by courtesy of Beit al-Zubair, Muscat

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in Zanzibar, and elsewhere in Omani society), but acquiesced in British arm-twisting by agreeing to limit the carrying of slaves to vessels in coastal waters, in a series of agreements including a Commercial Treaty in 1839 and another treaty in 1845. But it was only in 1873, after his death, that treaties ending the slave trade were signed with his two sons, Sultans in Muscat and Zanzibar.

The division of the Sultanate was another episode in which the British intervened in Omani affairs. When Sa'id bin Sultan (formerly referred to as 'Imaum' or 'Imam' Sa'id, but as 'Sultan' in British official documents from about 1839) died in 1856, the succession was disputed among his sons. Anxious to avoid turmoil, Lord Canning, Governor-General in Calcutta, set up a tribunal to arbitrate. The tribunal split the Sultanate in two, with one son as Sultan in Zanzibar and another as Sultan in Muscat, and required Zanzibar to pay an annual subsidy to Muscat of 40,000 Maria Theresa dollars to compensate for the differential in income between the two. From 1873, as a sweetener to end the slave trade, the British agreed to pay the subsidy on behalf of the Zanzibar Sultan, and continued to do so until well into the 20th century.

Protection of interests in India continued to motivate the British relationship with Oman through the 19th century, and this became a government – rather than commercial – concern after the nationalisation of the East India Company in 1858. The Political Agent in Muscat progressively increased his influence on the Sultan's conduct of affairs, and in 1890 officials in India even considered declaring a protectorate over Oman. Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, is reported to have said that he had "little doubt that the time will come ... when the Union Jack will be seen flying from the castles of Muscat." But it never did. The sultan at the time, Faysal bin Turki, was determined to retain freedom to conduct his own foreign policy, and was at odds with the British over his relationship with the French, and other issues. He died in the middle of a crisis with religious conservatives following the revival of the Ibadi Imamate and the election of a new Imam as a rival to the sultan. His eldest son, Taymur, who succeeded him, realised that he could only put down the rebellion, or reach an accommodation with the Imam and the tribes supporting him, with the armed assistance of the British. Eventually, after nearly five years of stalemate amid worsening economic conditions (partly the effects of World War 1), an agreement was brokered by the Political Agent and signed at Seeb in September 1920, under which Sultan Taymur agreed not to interfere in the affairs of the interior, and the Imam agreed to remain in peace with the Sultan and not to attack the coastal area.* Through the 1920s, despite reluctance by British Indian authorities to engage in

further involvement in Oman, Sultan Taymur was obliged to accept an ever-increasing British presence in his administration, to improve governance and relieve strains on the economy.

The British commitment to sustain al-Busa'idi sultans in power in Muscat was most clearly demonstrated in the Jabal Akhdar ('Green Mountain') and Dhofar campaigns of 1955-59 and 1968-75. There are plenty alive today who were involved in both campaigns, and in this article we need touch on them only briefly. The Jabal Akhdar, above Nizwa, had become the headquarters of the Imamate, and Sultan Taymur's son and successor, Sa'id, took the decision to end the division of the country and force the 'rebels' – as he saw them – into submission. This was eventually achieved, again with British military involvement, in January 1959, enabling Sa'id to style himself 'Sultan of Muscat and Oman' ('Oman' being, strictly speaking, the interior part of the country). The Dhofar campaign was of different character: although it began as an insurrection in protest at aspects of Sultan Sa'id's rule, it became a confrontation between communist forces supported by the Soviet Union and China operating out of Yemen on the one side, and Omani forces allied with British, Jordanian and Persian troops on the other. The Dhofar campaign ended after His late Majesty Sultan Qaboos had ousted his father from the throne and introduced measures that removed the causes of discontent and later led to the prosperity experienced by Oman from the late 1970s onwards.

With the hindsight of history, how can we summarise this relationship, or assess how the 'end of time' friendship has fared? In the time of Sayyid Sa'id bin Sultan, interests were shared (for example in maritime security and the furtherance of commerce), and – despite the great power and wealth of the British in India – surprisingly well-balanced. Sayyid Sa'id was a determined ruler, with a strong character, and resisted British pressure (for example, over slave trade abolition) when he wished. Later, the equilibrium was lost, as Muscat was separated from its East African empire and Oman suffered from poverty and internal dissent. British economic, administrative and military support was central in keeping al-Busa'idi sultans on their throne. In the closing decades of the 20th century, as Oman has successfully developed its natural resources and has been led by its second great Sultan, the two countries and peoples, and their governments, have developed a mature and equal relationship as befits states in the global community of nations. **F**

**Note: texts of these Agreements and Treaties are reproduced in: Alston, R, and Laing, S, Unshook till the End of Time: a history of relations between Britain and Oman, Gilgamesh, London, 2017. The 1646 agreement is on pp 9-10; the 1798 agreement ("Cowlmah") on pp 34-35; the 1800 Agreement (the 'Unshook Agreement') on pp 42-43; and the 1920 Seeb Agreement on pp 179-80.*