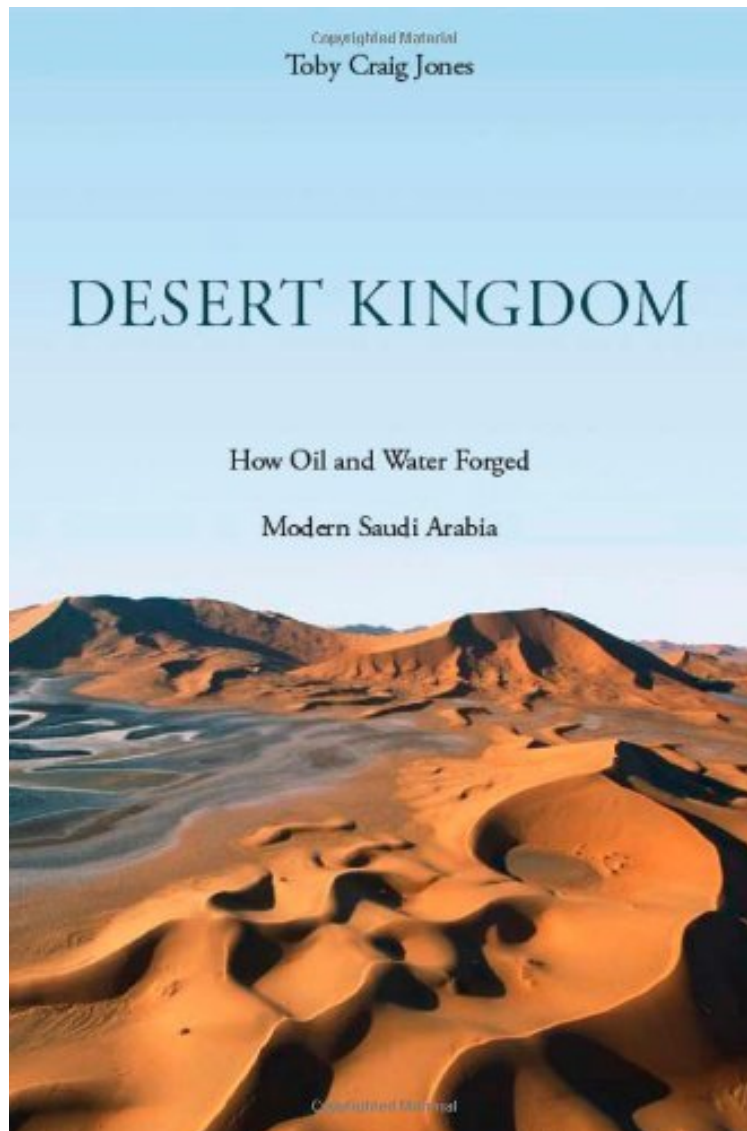


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## Desert Kingdom

*Toby Craig Jones*

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**Toby Craig Jones : Desert Kingdom** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Desert Kingdom:

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A bit too nuanced, but ultimately informativeBy SMSThis book does a good job of examining the dynamics of food and energy production, distribution, and control in the early part of its post oil history.9 of 13 people found the following review helpful. Stimulating but flawedBy G. J. DowlingThe attention this creative (and passionately anti-Saudi) study brings to the Kingdom's management of its water sources is welcome and valuable. Water or, more appropriately, its dearth has historically defined peninsular society, and the

effort to augment water production was a long-standing political objective of Al Saud. But the analysis falls short. For one thing the focus is too narrow. While the subtitle gives equal weight to oil and water, the study addresses primarily the latter, with attention narrowed further by a near exclusive concern with two oases - Qatif and al Hasa - located in the Kingdom's Eastern Province. There is little substantive discussion of oil development within the Kingdom while the international consequences of Arabian oil are barely touched on. A key political crisis of the 1950s concerning control over the oasis of Buraimi in the SE of the Peninsula is defined - in what seems a parody of succinctness - as a 'Saudi oil grab.' There are errors as well in his understanding of ARAMCO. With scant appreciation of the difficulties of a western business operating effectively within the Kingdom's cultural milieu, he repeats the accusation that the company was a racist enterprise. And he misconstrues ARAMCO's broader role in the society by identifying it as the Saudi state's 'surrogate' in the Eastern Province. Dr. Jones sees the modern political culture of the Kingdom as essentially created ex nihilo with the avid pursuit of resource development. For him, the Saudi regime had little conception on how to consolidate its power beyond Najd prior to mid-century when oil income began to rise significantly and the necessary western technology was increasingly available. Yet it is well to remember that Al Saud was governing al Hasa and Qatif from 1913, considerably before oil and an obliging western presence. Equally questionable is the author's persistence in his discussions of state policy of referring to undefined 'Saudi elites', homogenizing the varying political elements that underpinned the political order. His take on the western experts whose participation was vital to Al Saud's exploitation of the Kingdom's natural environment is also unsatisfactory. Clearly, the work of these individuals empowered the regime by providing the requisite expertise. But Dr. Jones goes too far when he claims that they, in effect, mentored the regime on how to govern. Finally, the text's characterization of the Saudi political culture borders on caricature: a violent, rapacious, oppressive yet fragile regime whose only mechanism to quiet the restive, non-Najdi Sunni populace was to buy them off, anxiously dispersing oil income and providing water. (As for the marginalized Shiite communities, there was no carrot at all, only stick.) Dr. Jones speaks of the social contract as a 'Devil's Bargain' with the exploitation of nature guiding and enabling the exploitation of people. But to claim that the political life of this country is hardly more than a brutalized exercise in barter is far too reductive and dismissive.

17 of 23 people found the following review helpful. The Groves of Academia...By John P. Jones III

At the beginning of Robert Lacey's *The Kingdom: Arabia and the House of Sa'ud*, he relates a conversation he had with a Georgetown educated member of the House of Saud: "I have lived in the Kingdom over 30 years, yet if I was to put down on paper how my family and this country worked, I would be lucky if I got a B+ mark. You have spent four years with us. The best you can hope for is a C." As I said in my review of Lacey's book, I thought he got it right, and earned at least an A-. Regrettably, Toby Craig Jones does not reference this work, nor another seminal work by Holden and Johns, (*The House of Saud*). And I do not think his analysis got it "right." Toby Jones is an Assistant Professor of History at Rutgers. He spent 10 months in the Kingdom, in 2003, at the height of terrorist attacks against Westerners and the Saudi government. This may very well have limited his ability (or desire) to travel around the Kingdom, and his tentative understanding of the country reflects this limited exposure. Jones identifies two factors in Saudi Arabia - certainly key factors, oil and water - and attempts to use these to explain virtually all of the Kingdom's historical development. Furthermore, he focuses almost exclusively on developments in the Eastern Province, which includes its substantial Shia population, to the exclusion of all the other areas of the country. He does not explain his research methodology, but appears to rely heavily on an eclectic array of documents, and eschews the interview process, particularly of Saudis. In a chapter entitled "Imperial Geology," he places much emphasis on the work of Karl Twitchell, an American geologist, who performed resource surveys of the Kingdom in the '30's and '40's. It may be flattering to the Westerners who worked in the country, but it is a major distortion of reality to say: "Among the most politically influential of those who worked in Saudi Arabia were the scientists, engineers, and experts who came to prospect for oil and to build the country's oil-industry infrastructure...It was in great measure through their work that the Saudis secured their realm" (p.11). For inexplicable reasons, Jones focuses on historical developments in the '50's and '60's, and almost completely omits developments of the last 40 years! For example, on page 134, he says: "Area residents interviewed in 2003 suggested that Aramco was responsible for the disappearing water in the 1960s and 1970s. So, he DID conduct some interviews, but that is all that he said about them. Whereas, he devotes pages of his book to letters that were written to the Saudi newspapers in the '50's concerning the municipal conditions in the eastern city, and Shia stronghold, of Qatif. He also highlights a report by an American anthropologist working for Aramco, Federico Vidal, about the (unspecified) Bedouin flocking to the area around the Ghawar oil fields in 1956: "...an invasion of Bedouins asking for water..." Jones does say that "Vidal's was a difficult claim to substantiate. The Bedouin in Ghawar have left no known record of their own." There was no mention of this "invasion" in Donald Cole's excellent sociological study on the Al Murrah tribe, *Nomads of the Nomads: The Al Murrah Bedouin of the Empty Quarter*. Surely one large Bedouin tribe moving into the territory of another would not have gone unnoticed. Jones gives primacy, and numerous pages of coverage, to the Shia revolt in Qatif, in 1979. Almost in passing, he states: "Saudis rulers' sense of anxiety...was challenged not only by the Shia uprising but also by a second incident that occurred on the other side of the country, in the holy city of Mecca." He then goes on to briefly describe the seizing of the Grand Mosque by Juhayman al-Utaybi. But in terms of changing the Kingdom's political and

cultural direction, the event in Mecca was at least a magnitude more significant than the one in Qatif. Jones does mention, but only as a footnote, Trofimov's excellent account in *The Siege of Mecca: The 1979 Uprising at Islam's Holiest Shrine*. I had numerous other problems with the author's account. Consider: "...Saudi leaders turned their imperial gaze to the east" (p. 90). Jones is not talking about India... he is talking about the oasis at Al-Hasa, which had been considered part of the Al-Saud's area of influence, if not territory, for hundreds of years. Would one say that John Adams turned his imperial gaze at North Carolina? He places the great northern desert, the Nafud, "...on the Saudi Arabian-Jordanian border" (p. 117). Does that place Al-Jawf in Amman? More "imperialism": "through midcentury Saudi rulers had ruled as though they were administering an empire rather than building a nation." Rich from a citizen of a country that does administer an empire. And there are numerous redundancies throughout the book, for example: "His eldest son Saud ibn Abd al-Aziz succeeded his father almost immediately (p. 56). Three pages later: "The first Saudi monarch was succeeded by his eldest son, Saud, shortly after his death." So what is to like? Numerous books on the Kingdom border on sheer fantasy, and there is none of that. Jones' work is well-documented with footnotes, and some aspects of the history of the Kingdom are not covered in other works, including his detailed look at the Eastern Province. But it is a historian's role to sift through the details, and identify and prioritize the dominant factors in a given outcome. To a large measure, Jones failed in "weighting" these factors. Academics matter. York Harding was Graham Greene's fictional Ivy League professor who filled the head of the young CIA agent, Alden Pyle (as well as others) with a fanciful and essentially incorrect view of Vietnam in Greene's classic novel *The Quiet American* (Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition). The Vietnamese leadership knew so much more about us than our leadership did of them. Likewise with the Saudis. We need to do a better job this time around, or we simply repeat so many of the same mistakes we made in Southeast Asia in Southwest Asia. Professor Jones should talk to the Saudis more, and develop a better paradigm to explain the country. Starting with Robert Lacey would not be inappropriate. In the meantime, 3-stars.

This is an environmental and political history of Saudi Arabia, revealing the power of the environment to shape and influence the political state. Jones traces the modernization of the Saudi state and its rich oil reserves that were developed with the help of U.S. expertise and a technocratic elite who managed not only the vast oil reserves and water supplies but also the growth of political institutions. From the time oil was discovered in the 1930s, its control has been at the center of Saudi political authority and of the modern state. In addition the state quickly learned to exploit access to water as a means of controlling the population. Jones demonstrates the power of the Saudi environment to influence its modern political institutions and ideologies over the last eighty years. It is a fascinating story that helps explain not only how the Saudi state was transformed but also how the U.S. was inextricably involved in its technological and political modernization from the beginning.