



Contacts:

Senior Marketing Manager, OUP: Brian.Hughes@oup.com

Author: egearon@gmail.com

THE SAHARA: A Cultural History by Eamonn Gearon
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ADVANCE PRAISE FOR “THE SAHARA”

“A succinct and successful summary of the past, present and future of this surprisingly busy desert.”
- Michael Palin, author, formerly of Monty Python, and President of the RGS

“With the ‘Arab Spring’ affecting much of North Africa, this book provides a very useful introduction to exactly how the region has reached its present situation.”
- Dr Trevor James, Secretary of the British Historical Association

“A painstaking study of a remarkable terrain and its equally extraordinary inhabitants.”
- Mick Herron, Geographical Magazine

“The enormous research that must have been undertaken to compile such a work is a great credit to Eamonn Gearon. It is a well-written book that armchair and desert travellers will appreciate. Explorers should certainly have a copy in their libraries.”
- Colonel John Blashford-Snell, OBE, President of the Scientific Exploration Society

“A wonderful book that is as rich as the Sahara is austere; educational, informative and inspiring.”
- Tim Butcher, author of *Blood River* and *Chasing the Devil*

“Eamonn Gearon is an amiable and well informed guide with a tremendous eye for a good anecdote. His story-telling canters across the huge expanse of the Sahara with assurance and wit. This book is vital background reading for anyone who wants to understand the deep roots of the Arab Spring.”
- David Loyn, BBC Foreign correspondent

“... crafted with originality and ingenuity ... a good sense of story-telling ... an enjoyable read”
- Lirim Azemi, Think Africa Press

“... it is refreshing for a writer to approach the Sahara as an entity of its own and try to dispel the images we hold of an uninhabited, empty space ...”
- Francesca Washtell, Department of International History, London School of Economics

“For width of learning, and skill in finding gems of interest, this book is hard to beat.”
- Robert Twigger, explorer and author of *Angry White Pyjamas* and other titles

PRESS RELEASE

Eamonn Gearon is an internationally regarded voice on social and political affairs in the Greater Middle East – from Casablanca to Kabul. Eamonn is also a sometime Saharan explorer and, as a consequence, camel expert. The so-called “ship of the desert” is always Eamonn’s preferred mode of transport on his solo expeditions, preferring animals to motorcars.

From backstreets and medinas, to mosques, classrooms and boardrooms, Eamonn’s hard-won knowledge of the Arab World is enhanced by his ability to speak, read and write Arabic. Such skills allow Eamonn to provide timely analysis of regional politics, business, energy and terrorism issues to business intelligence organisations and private clients.

In **THE SAHARA: A CULTURAL HISTORY**, Eamonn focuses 20 years of regional expertise to guide readers through the life and times, past and present, of the world’s greatest desert.

A unique and long overdue book, **THE SAHARA** proves the importance of history in understanding events in today’s North Africa, as well as providing invaluable insights into the region’s possible futures. Showing just how wrong is the view that “that’s history” means something irrelevant, every page of “The Sahara” provides examples of how history continues to inform the present reality of the Great Desert and those who come into contact with it.

Informative, entertaining, and charged throughout with Eamonn Gearon’s inimitable style, humour and erudition, **THE SAHARA** connects the romance of the desert with its history, bringing both to life.

- **Conquered and Cursed**

From the 50,000-strong army of Cambyses, swallowed in a sandstorm in the Sixth century BC, to the US Marines’ first foreign engagement, in 1805; Hannibal and his elephants, Caesar against Anthony and Cleopatra; Alexander the Great; the armies of Islam; Napoleon; and Rommel versus Monty.

- **Myths and Mysteries**

Whales in the desert to the arrival of camels in the Great Sand Sea; chariots of the gods and colonialists’ motor-cars; the Land of the Dead to Timbuktu; salt and gold mines, fields of oil and gas and a man-made river.

- **Artists, Writers and Filmmakers**

From ancient rock art of the Tassili frescoes to the modernism of Matisse and Klee; Ibn Battuta to Paul Bowles; *Beau Geste*’s French Foreign Legion to *Star Wars* and *The English Patient*.

- **Modern Madness, Uncertain Futures**

Al-Qaeda and the antics of Colonel Gaddafi, to issues of energy security and water scarcity, the Sahara has seen it all before. **THE SAHARA** shows readers how and when.

- **And much more** (and that includes sand dunes!)

AUTHOR BIO

Eamonn Gearon once sold his house in London to buy camels and follow his dream of walking across the Sahara. This was not the first time he was prompted to engage in a grand adventure.

An English-born Irishman, Eamonn ran away from home at the age of five. Reaching the end of the road, he was asked by the Ukrainian man who ran the local deli, where he was going: “I’m going to Africa to explore.” First returning home for his tea, Eamonn completed his journey in his early twenties.

Moving to Egypt, Eamonn spent time living with the Bedu, from whom he learnt about camels and life in the Sahara. After accompanying the Bedu on a number of desert walks, he eventually set off on his own, conducting several lengthy, solo camel-powered expeditions in the Sahara.

Eamonn has now lived and travelled throughout the Greater Middle East – from Kabul to Casablanca – for nearly 20 years. One of his more unlikely encounters was with Colonel Gaddafi’s tailor, who was kind enough to make a gift of a handmade suit for the otherwise sartorially challenged traveller.

An Arabist, Eamonn has worked as a journalist and analyst specializing in social and political affairs, including al-Qaeda and other Islamist-inspired groups.

Keen to explore Saudi Arabia, but unable to obtain a visa as a freelance journalist, Eamonn spent a year there working undercover as a teacher in a boys’ school. While there, he covered the funeral of King Fand, local politics and the Kingdom’s battle against al-Qaeda.

Ten years after meeting his wife in the Libyan Desert, he took her on an extended, six-month honeymoon to Afghanistan. Based in central Kabul, he was not only studying the resurgence of the Taliban, but working as a special advisor for international business.

Eamonn has recently returned from his former home city of Cairo, where he spent the revolution in and around Tahrir Square.

His work has appeared in the Daily Telegraph, Independent, Times Literary Supplement, and the Geographical and London Magazines. Among those he provides analysis for is the Jane’s Information Group, for whom he reports on the Armed Forces of the Middle East.

Today, Eamonn acts as an advisor for private business, the military and government figures on both sides of the Atlantic. His over-arching mission is to broaden cultural understanding between the Greater Middle East and the West.

Eamonn is available for interview. egearon@gmail.com

“The Sahara: A Cultural History” is his first book.

LINKS BETWEEN SAHARAN HISTORY & CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL, SECURITY & ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

1. The War In Libya

With the battle for control of Libya grabbing headlines this year, it is important to consider the sources of the inspiration for those who fought on both sides.

Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was long keen to promote an image of himself as a resistance fighter from the heart of the Sahara. Gaddafi, and his opponents, are both inspired by Omar Mukhtar, the Libyan resistance leader whose campaign against Italian occupation lasted for 20 years in the early part of the Twentieth century, five times longer than the First World War.

Born in a small village near Tobruk, Omar Mukhtar, was an unlikely national hero. Before the Italian invasion he taught the Quran to children in the local school. After the invasion he became known as the Lion of the Desert.

Mukhtar owed his success against Italy's superior numbers to avoiding large-scale, direct confrontation with the enemy, and his knowledge of local geography. Leading small bands on raids against Italian outposts and their lines of communication, Mukhtar was also adaptable, developing new tactics whenever the Italians changed their own strategy. Mukhtar was eventually captured by Italian troops and hanged at Suluq, Libya, in 1931.

Eighty years after his death, Mukhtar's legend is still strong in Libya. His image is ubiquitous, appearing on the Libyan 10-dinar banknote and on car bumper stickers.

In June 2009, the theatrically inclined Muammar Gaddafi wore a photograph of Mukhtar as an Italian prisoner on his lapel when he met the former Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi.

Ultimately, Gaddafi made a decision to stay, or was too late to try and flee, and so died in Libya, his homeland, just like his avowed hero.

For those who fought to get rid of Gaddafi, the desire to be rid of the dictator was strong enough to inspire the war of resistance for as long as was needed.

2. Climate Change

With so much talk of climate change, and the numerous strategies proposed to adapt to this changing situation, it is a good moment to remember the changes the Sahara once underwent and how it adjusted to this new reality.

The Sahara was once an ocean: (between 30 and 26 million years ago)

The climate of the Sahara went through a major climatic change, resulting in a more tropical and drier environment. Beasts such as the proto-whale, King Lizard, and the SuperCroc died out.

The Sahara used to be a green and pleasant land: (roughly 10,000 to 4,000 BCE)

In place of the big beasts, large numbers of smaller animals including mice, birds, and cold-blooded species emerged, better suited to the new prevailing conditions. But it was not just small fauna that benefited from the change in climate. It was during this time that Homo sapiens emerged, just 200,000 years ago.

The Sahara as desert: (from around 2300 BCE)

As the monsoons from the South stopped, permanent sources of water dried up. Human and animal populations were forced to move away or die. In this post-pluvial era, aridity became the new standard, and the Sahara finally took on the desiccated quality that we are familiar with today.

The arrival of camels: (circa 1,000 BCE):

While at no point in the history of the Sahara was the desert a solid barrier between north and south, as the region became increasingly arid the difficulties associated with desert travel inevitably increased. After the camel was introduced and became firmly established in the region, this situation was radically altered, with transport and movement of peoples becoming significantly easier.

If the fact that change came about after the arrival of the camel in the Sahara is not surprising, the rapid speed with which these changes came about was truly amazing.

3. Aerial Bombing

With recent and ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the current NATO bombing of Libya, the use of aerial bombing continues to be as contentious an issue as it was when it was first put to large-scale use in colonial conflicts of the 1910s and 1920s.

The Sahara has seen it all before: Libya holds the distinction of being the site of the first ever aerial bombing from an aircraft.

The 1911 Italian invasion of Libya coincided with the development of aircraft technology, which was quickly seen as a valuable tool for military operations.

Although greatly outnumbered by regular Italian troops with the latest arms, resistance from Ottoman-Turkish troops based in Libya was fiercer than the Italians were expecting, forcing the invaders to increase their troops from 20,000 to 100,000.

On 1 November 1911, Lieutenant Giulio Gavotti of the Italian Army, flying at 600 feet, dropped four hand grenades on a Turkish camp.

Although Gavotti did not kill or injure anyone in the attack, his actions earned him a small, if dubious, footnote in the history of warfare.

4. Water Management

The management of water resources is becoming increasingly important, especially in those parts of the world with limited water supplies and rapidly increasing populations.

The likelihood of water-driven conflict far outweighs the threat from dwindling supplies of oil and gas in the Middle East.

Regulation and technology are being called upon to limit polluting water and expand the options for both cleaning and desalinating water. In this area, we can learn from the expertise of a people who lived in the heart of the Sahara many centuries ago.

The Garamantean civilisation thrived in central-Libya around 1500 BCE. Their example is one that Colonel Muammar Gaddafi has tried to emulate in our times.

Unlike other Saharan cultures, the Garamantes moved into the desert, away from the Mediterranean basin, after the desertification process had taken hold in North Africa. Once established in their new desert home, the Garamantes developed an innovative hydrological system that allowed them to farm in the Sahara for centuries.

The Garamantes owed their success entirely to tapping the vast aquifers that lie below the limestone desert floor, by digging an elaborate series of tunnels, unleashing huge quantities of otherwise hidden water. Some tunnels, *foggaras* in Berber, went down as far as 120 feet, before releasing free-flowing jets of water.

According to one of the archaeologists responsible for investigating the Garamantes, David Mattingly, this was, “the first time in history that a non-riverine area of the Sahara ... had produced an urban society.”

In modern times, Libya’s leader Colonel Gaddafi drew inspiration from the Garamantes, inaugurating the so-called Great Man-made River Project. This engineering feat in the desert extracts 6.5 million cubic metres of water per day, but may well become a source of worry for the country’s future rather than the blessing it was supposed to be.

5. Engineering Solutions

With the arrival of motorcars, much of the Sahara became accessible for the first time in modern times. The ability to map the desert, which the advent of cars allowed, had a far-reaching impact during the First World War.

Many of the practical engineering solutions to the problems of desert driving were invented by Ralph Bagnold, who worked for Egypt's Survey Department in the 1920s.

Bagnold's education was a practical one; taking his Ford Model T on numerous trips into the Sahara, learning as he went, until he was ready to tackle the seemingly impassable Great Sand Sea.

In the course of his driving experiments, Bagnold devised a number of useful tools, including the sun compass. This car-mounted device allowed navigation by dead reckoning without a vehicle's metal body interfering with bearings, as it would with a regular compass.

Another Bagnold invention was the sand mat, used then, as now, under a car's tyres to give it traction, thus freeing a vehicle stuck in sand.

Bagnold also worked out how to drive over soft sand. The simple answer, which desert drivers the world over still use, involves nothing more complicated than letting out some of the air in a car's tyres.

Perhaps his most ingenious invention was a closed-loop water system. Linked to the car's radiator, escaping water vapour is captured and sent back into the radiator. The massive reduction in water lost meant the possibility of ever-longer journeys without the need for carrying so much water for the vehicles' radiators.

Becoming the world authority on the movement of sand dunes – Bagnold was the author of “The Physics of Blown Sand” – meant that even in the 1970s NASA consulted Bagnold when researching what the surface of Mars would be like.

6. Alternative Energy

Today, the Sahara offers the promise of solar and wind power on a massive scale; infinite sources of alternative energy that have the long-term potential to eradicate worries about world oil and gas reserves.

The solar potential has long been understood by energy watchers. Today, the dreams are being put into action, and are increasingly receiving attention from those searching for possible large-scale locations suitable for generating alternative energy.

Plans for harnessing solar energy are well advanced, with an estimate by one European consortium, Desertec, suggesting that an area of 6000 square miles of solar panels—roughly the size of Connecticut—would be sufficient to supply the energy needs of both North Africa and Europe.

Further, Desertec also reckons that 35,000 square miles of solar panels, roughly one per cent of the Sahara's surface, could produce the same energy as all power plants operating around the world today.

Although in the relatively early stages of development, even the most optimistic proponents of such grand schemes recognize that the biggest obstacle to their success is the necessity of cross-border cooperation, especially between nations that are hardly on the best of terms, Morocco and Algeria being the most obvious example.

While the power of the sun is the Sahara's most readily accessed asset, plans have also been drawn up for the development of large-scale wind farms, primarily in western parts of the desert but also off the coast of Morocco and Western Sahara.

SAHARAN WORLD FIRSTS

1st US Troops on Foreign Soil: The site of the first engagement involving American forces on foreign soil, at the Battle of Derna, Libya, 1805, providing part of the opening line of the US Marines' Hymn, "From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli."

1st Modern Autobiography: St Augustine (354-430), a Numidian Berber wrote Confessions more than 1600 years ago. Hailed as the first modern autobiography, it is a work of startling honesty that includes a sense of the subconscious centuries before Freud and psychoanalysis were dreamt of!

1st Aerial Bombing: 1 November, 1911, one Lieutenant Giulio Gavotti, flying at 600 feet, dropped four hand grenades on an Ottoman camp in Libya during the Italian-Turkish war. The action earned Gavotti the small, if dubious, footnote in the history of warfare as the first use of aerial bombing.

1st Novel: *The Golden Ass* by the North African, Roman writer Lucius Apuleius; the only surviving Latin novel and the world's first novel. It tells the story of a sorcerer's apprentice, Lucius of Madaurus, who is turned into a donkey by a witch before suffering a number of humiliating, misadventures.

1st Color Film: *The Desert Song* (1929) directed by Roy Del Ruth and starring John Boles as the handsome bandit Red Shadow and Carlotta King as the love interest was the first color film released by Warner Brothers, although only a black and white print survives.

1st American Bestseller: "Sufferings in Africa" by Captain James Riley. An account of his and his crew's enslavement by black masters. The publishers said it was, "read by more than a million now living in these United States. Probably no book ... ever published, made so striking and permanent an impression upon the minds of those that read it." Abraham Lincoln said it was the book that most informed his anti-slavery opinions.

1st Globe: After al-Idrisi produced the Book of Roger, he created a version of this atlas for Roger inscribed on a solid silver disc that measured six feet in diameter, weighed 450 pounds, and was the first known attempt to produce a true globe.

1st Book of Philosophy of History and Social Science: Born in Tunis, 1332, Ibn Khaldun, authored Muqaddimah, the first book to tackle the philosophy of history and the social sciences (including sociology, demography, historiography, and cultural history), not to mention a mediaeval forerunner to the study of economics, as we now understand the subject.

SAHARAN QUOTATIONS, PROVERBS AND SAYINGS

From the back cover:

“The Arab simply looked at us. He placed his hands firmly on our shoulders, and we obeyed him. We lay down upon the sand. There are no races here, nor any languages, nor any discord ... There is this poor nomad who has placed his archangelic hands on our shoulders. ... All other pleasures seem trivial to those of us who have known the joy of a rescue in the Sahara.”

- Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

“There are no two ways about deserts - either you dislike intensely being in them or you find their attractions hard to resist.”

- WB Kennedy-Shaw

“Everything is so clear here, too clear! No more obstacles to overcome, no more progress, no more action. You wouldn't know how to act anymore, or almost how to think: you'd die of eternity. ... I wanted to possess this country, and this country has instead possessed me.”

- Isabelle Eberhardt

“The fact is that we were a little afraid of the desert ... because it was so different from all experience. ... It lures the foolish onwards by its good firm surface, as several would-be sportsmen have found to their cost.”

- Major Ralph Bagnold

“The Desert produces her own type of man exactly as the sea does.”

- Rudyard Kipling

“The desert rules you, you don't rule the desert.”

- Tuareg saying

“If you put the federal government in charge of the Sahara Desert, in five years there'd be a shortage of sand.”

- Milton Friedman

“Here is the meaning of this most opportune moment: colour and I are one. I am a painter.”
- Paul Klee, writing from the Tunisian desert

“Salt comes from the North, gold from the South, but the word of God and the treasures of wisdom come from Timbuktu.”
- Islamic Proverb

“‘What is Allah’s greatest gift to man?’ [he asked] me suddenly. I felt this was a test of my faith in Islam, so I promptly replied, ‘The Koran.’ He looked at me scornfully. ‘The camel! If there were no camels here, there would be no dates, no food, nothing!’ He paused and added solemnly, ‘If there were no camels here, there would be no men!’”
- Rosita Forbes

“A man who refuses to acknowledge his god is unwise to set foot in the desert.”
- Basil Rathbone, in a pre-Sherlock Holmes role

“To survive at all, the desert dweller – Tuareg or Aboriginal – must develop a prodigious sense of orientation. He must forever be naming, sifting, comparing a thousand different ‘signs’ – the tracks of a dung beetle or the ripple of a dune – to tell him where he is; where the others are; where rain has fallen; where the next meal is coming from...”
- Bruce Chatwin

“At sundown, the Arabs turned towards Mecca to carry out their devotions, a religious people, more than I could say for our lot, the only time they knelt was to pick up money.”
- Spike Milligan

“With few exceptions, landscape alone is of insufficient interest to warrant the effort it takes to see it. Even the works of man, unless they are being used in his daily living, have a way of losing their meaning, and take on the qualities of decoration. ... North Africa without its tribes, inhabited by, let us say, the Swiss, would be merely a rather more barren California.”
- Paul Bowles

“A good husband is the one who brings enough water.”
- Tuareg saying