

Iraqi Kurdistan - 1975.

It is a long time ago now but perhaps some will be amused by an experience my wife and I had in Iraq in 1975. We had arrived in Baghdad the previous autumn. The Ba'athist Iraqi Government was engaged in an attempt to put down a revolt by the Kurds in Northern Iraq which was supported covertly by Iran from across the frontier. As a result foreigners, and especially diplomats who were required to have a pass even to go out of Baghdad, were not allowed to travel in the North.

Saddam Hussain, then the Vice-President, was even at that time the real power in the government. In March 1975 he reached an agreement at a meeting with the Shah in Algiers. Under this the Shah privately undertook to withdraw his support for the Kurds, without acknowledging that he had ever been giving it, in return for a concession by Iraq granting Iran a frontier along the mid-course of the Shatt al Arab, instead of the historical border along its Eastern Shore. As a result the ban on travel was lifted. Incidentally this concession by Iraq was later to be one of the bones of contention in the Iraq-Iran war of 1980-88.

As soon as we were free to do so, my wife and I applied for a permit and having booked ourselves through the Iraqi travel agency into a hotel in Sulaimaniya, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, duly set off. In Sulaimaniya, quite a large town for those parts, none of those we asked seemed ever to have heard of our hotel. This, it turned out, was not surprising for when we eventually found it it was clear that reports of its readiness to receive guests were wildly premature: the walls were still not much above foundation level. My driver, himself a Kurd, was at least able to communicate locally and so with him as our guide we found our way to a small hotel in the centre of the town and were shown to a room. It was fairly basic but I have known worse and since it seemed, though I could not be sure, that someone had been turned out to make way for us, it would have been churlish to have been fussy.

After unpacking we went out to a restaurant for dinner. As we were finishing, an armed posse arrived, led as it turned out by the Deputy Governor. We could not possibly stay in our hotel, we were told, but must be the guests of the Province. As for the bill for dinner, they would take care of that. So we were led away escorted by a man with a rifle, back to our hotel to pack and be removed to whatever 'they' might decide. In fact we were taken first to a hall where there seemed to be a public meeting of various officials all speaking Kurdish. There we were rejoined by my driver, who told us, not very comfortingly, that 'They don't know what to do with you'.

In due course a decision was reached and we were led away to a house which appeared to be empty - I remember thinking at the time that, although we did not seem to be under arrest, it might be the house in which political detainees were housed - and were told we could choose our room and could unpack. No sooner had we started to do this than the Head of Police appeared. It was all a mistake, he said: we were to be the guests of the Governor, a recently appointed Kurd, called Amin. So we removed again, this time to a villa on a hill top overlooking the town, where we were introduced to our host and shown our room. By this time it was about 10 pm. We were invited however to join Amin and the Head of Police on the lawn, where we were joined by Amin's cook.

It was a glorious spring night, with a tapestry of stars in a clear sky. So, at rest at last, we sat in the dark drinking neat whisky – my wife, virtually teetotal, thought it was port – conversing in desultory Arabic. The cook, it turned out, had worked for the British oil company, the IPC, before it was nationalised and had some English. Amusingly he and I found we had a number of mutual acquaintances in the oil world.

The next morning at breakfast we had a long talk to Amin. He was missing his family who had yet to join him, but he was relaxed about the situation in his Province. We drove off to visit the highlands of Kurdistan with its spectacular scenery, precipitous cliffs and rushing rivers. We then returned home, passing the site of the battle of Gaugemela where Alexander defeated Darius in 331 BC. Two weeks later Amin was shot and wounded by fellow Kurds in an ambush.

Johnny Graham.

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THE HOLLY AND THE IVY (AND MISTLETOE)

Holly, ivy and mistletoe are the basic ingredients for our traditional festive decorations. Other than the fact that their shapes, surface and textures compliment each other making them such a pleasing combination in a design, why do we use them?

The tradition of dressing a house is a Christian practice dating back to the Romans, when giving branches as a gift was a symbol of good luck.

HOLLY was used in churches as its sharp leaves and red berries were associated with Christ's crown of thorns. In traditional Christmas songs holly is said to be a man's plant – the more prickly the holly the better the master would rule for the coming year. Holly, like elder, was believed to have power over horses and was used for whips. It was also used as a powerful fertility charm against house goblins and witches.

IVY is said to represent woman and even today is used in wedding flowers and is a sign of fidelity. In the 18th century it became a symbol of sadness as it was always found draped over old ruins. In the Highlands and Islands, ivy was plaited into wreaths with rowan and honeysuckle as a good luck charm. It was said that it kept evil away from cows and helped them to produce good milk and butter, therefore ivy was draped over the lintel of the byre.

MISTLETOE, revered by the Druids, had to be cut with a silver sickle, never an iron one, or bad luck would follow. Mistletoe must never touch the ground, thus the tradition of hanging it up denoting friendship and hospitality. Tradition says mistletoe should be caught in a white cloth held by four virgins. It will then have a miracle power of healing, protect against witchcraft and storms and bring fertility to the land and the people of the house (all that kissing perhaps!). Mistletoe in the language of flowers means "surmounting all difficulties" – hardly surprising if was to do all the above! The kissing custom, peculiar to Britain, originates from a Norse legend relating to Balder the God of Peace. Mistletoe was not allowed inside a church as it was a sacred plant of pre-Christian religions, the one exception being in York Minster where it has been placed on the high altar for the twelve days of Christmas since the middle ages. While the berries are sought after by birds they are poisonous to humans.