IMPRESSIONS OF AN ENGLISH TRAVELLER IN LIBYA

by Arnold Toynbee

I first became acquainted with Libya more than seventy years ago, when I was a child in London before the close of the nineteenth century. Someone gave me an annual volume of an American children's magazine, and the part of its contents that attracted me most was a serial story — part fiction, part fact — of the war of 1801-4 between the United States and the Turkish governor of Tarabolous. This war did not involve either the Ottoman Empire or the people of Tripolitania. The governor of Tripoli was at that time virtually independent, and he was also an autocrat. His subjects were not consulted. However, this story did at least teach me, at the age of seven or eight, the position of Libya on the map of the World.

Libya impinged on me more forcibly in the autumn of 1911. I was on my way through France and Italy to Greece when the Italian Government declared war on the Ottoman Empire and invaded Libya. By that date, the Ottoman Imperial Government was once again in effective control of Libya, and the Turks joined forces with a Libyan national resistance movement. In that war the Libyans had the beau rôle; they were gallantly defending their country against an unprovoked act of aggression by a stronger power. On the Italian side, it was not a people's war. I remember watching Italian conscripts embarking at the port of Cività Vecchia for the Libyan front. They looked unenthusiastic and indeed positively unhappy.

From 1924 to 1956, Libya was constantly in my mind. During those thirty-three years my wife and I were producing a **Survey of International Affairs** for the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London, and we included in our survey periodical accounts of the ebb and flow of the Italian attempt to occupy the whole of Libya and to hold it down. I hate imperialism, especially when it is accompanied by brutality — and imperialists usually become brutal when they meet with determined resistance. In the long-drawn-out struggle between the Italian army and the Sanusiyah, my sympathy was, of course, on the Libyan side. The liquidation of Italian rule over Libya during the Second World War made me rejoice, and the recording of it in my survey gave me satisfaction.

This was my personal background to my visit to Libya in 1964 as the guest of the Government and of the University of Libya. This visit has been a memorable event in my life.

By now, I have travelled widely — especially since my retirement in 1965 from my post at the Royal Institute of International Affairs. In visiting a country, I aim at seeing as much as possible of three things in particular. My first concern is with the people of the country — I mean the living generation, its present condition, and its prospects. In the second place I am interested in the country's history — the experience of previous generations of its inhabitants and the surviving records of these experiences, especially the surviving works of ancient art and architecture. The third thing in which I am interested is the landscape, both as Nature originally made it and as Man has modified it to suit his purposes. In Libya in 1964 I learnt many things in all these three fields of inquiry.

As it happened, the date of my visit coincide with an important moment in Libya's long history. Before the discovery of Libya's subterranean wealth in the shape of mineral oil, the country's principal economic activity had been pastoral. In the Homeric Greek epic poems, which took their final shape at least as early as the eighth century B.C., Libya is already celebrated for

the excellence of its sheep. The products of a pastoral economy are valuable, but, in the present-day world, pastoral wealth is far surpassed by mineral wealth. The striking of oil has suddenly made Libya one of the rich countries of the World. Wealth opens up great new opportunities, but, when wealth comes to a country suddenly, the country's new situation can also be dangerous.

I have had a first-hand glimpse of this potential danger in another country that I have visited within the last few years. I am speaking of Venezuela, which, like Libya, has suddenly become rich through the discovery there of mineral wealth in vast quantities. In Venezuela today the country is already rich but the people are still poor. Venezuela's new wealth has not yet found its way into the pockets of more than a small minority of the population. When a country, as well as its people, is poor the people will resign themselves to being poor. They will see themselves as being the victims, not of human injustice, but of bad luck. They happen to live in a country that is destitute of natural resources. The people's attitude changes, however, if their country proves to be rich after all, while the majority of its inhabitants still remain as poor as they have always been. Poverty in the midst of wealth is provocative. It is no accident that Venezuela, which is the richest country in the Americas and perhaps the richest in all the World, is also one of the most unstable of the World's countries politically.

I think Libya has a lesson to learn from Venezuela. I should advise Libyans to study what has happened in Venezuela and to make sure that the same thing shall not happen to their own country. In Venezuela the Libyans can see what to avoid; in Kuwayt they can see what to do. Kuwayt, like Libya and Venezuela, has suddenly become rich through striking oil. In Kuwayt, the Government has succeeded in distributing the benefits of the country's new wealth very widely among the people. Kuwayt has, in my opinion, discovered how to avoid the potential danger that a sudden increase in national wealth brings with it. If Libya does what Kuwayt has done, Libya's political and social prospects, as well as her economic prospects, will be bright.

Turning next to Libya's past, I will glance first at the latest chapter of Libya's history before the present one, and here I will pay a tribute to the Italians. As foreign conquerors, the Italians have left behind them an unpleasant memory. To be ruled by foreign conquerors is unnatural and painful. A foreign colonial regime can never be popular. Nevertheless, in Libya — and in Ethiopia too — the Italians have bequeathed some valuable legacies to the national regime by which Italian colonial rule has now been replaced. The Italians have equipped both Libya and Ethiopia with a network of first-class roads, and in Libya they have made a start in the revival of agriculture. Of course the Italians did this in their own interests. Like the British and Dutch settlers in Southern Africa, the Italians in Libya took the potentially best agricultural land for themselves. But they also made a big investment of Italian capital in Libya. They built farm-houses; they created irrigation systems; and this Italian capital investment has been inheritld by the liberated Libya of today. In 1964 I was struck by the evidence of what the Italians had done for Libyan agriculture in Cyrenaïca — particularly in the Marj, round Barce — and also in the Jabal in the hinterland of Tarabolous.

I hope the Libyans are going to maintain and extend the agricultural development of their country which the Italians, began. I think it would be a mistake for Libya to allow herself to depend economically on her newly discovered oil-resources alone. Even the richest oil-fields are not inexhaustible. Moreover, it is conceivable that, long before the World's remaining reserves of mineral oil have been used up, oil will be superseded by other sources of physical energy — atomic energy, for example. In our time, science and technology are advancing at a rapidly accelerating pace, and this means that a commodity, such as mineral oil, which is commercially valuable today may lose much of its present value tomorrow. There are some countries — Kuwayt, for instance, and Sa'udi Arabia — which, apart from their mineral oil, have no other economic resources to speak of. Libya is more fortunate. Libya has it in her power to diversify her economy, and, on a long view, this is, I feel sure, the right economic policy for her to follow. Libya

should retain her pastoral economy and should also expand her agriculture, besides developing her production of mineral oil.

The potentialities for agricultural development in Libya are great. We have historical and archaeological evidence for this. In the ninth century B.C., the coast of Tripolitania was colonised by Phoenicians from the Asian Arab country that is now the Lebanon Republic. In the seventh century B.C. Cyrenaïca was colonised by the Greeks. Both sets of colonists developed agriculture in their new homes. By the time when both parts of Libya were incorporated in the Roman Empire, Libya had become one of the most productive of the agricultural countries bordering on the Mediterranean Sea, and, under the rule of the Umayyad and 'Abbasid Caliphs, Libya continued to be agriculturally prosperous. Her agriculture was ruined by the invasion of the Banu Hilal and the Banu Sulaym in the eleventh century of the Christian Era.

Agriculture has now been revived in Libya after an interval of about nine hundred years. With the means that modern technology can provide, it should be possible to reach and surpass the extent of Libya's past agricultural development when this was at its acme in the Roman Age. This is, I should say, the agricultural target that Libya ought now to set for herself. Libya already has her age-old pastoral industry and her young oil industry. She should develop an agricultural industry to match. If she does this, she will have equipped herself with a diversified and balanced economy, and this is a prudent form of insurance in an age of rapid and unpredictable technological and economic changes.

In discussing Libya's agricultural potentialities, I have referred to the Phoenician, Greek, and Roman phases of Libya's history. These phases of her history have left marvellous material monuments of their economic prosperity and of the architectural and artistic genius for which this prosperity gave scope. I am thinking, in particular, of Cyrene, Apollonia, Ptolemais, and Tokra in Cyrenaica, and of Lepcis and Sabratha in Tripolitania. These monuments are wealth in two senses. They are a source of literal wealth because they ensure that Libya shall develop a lucrative

tourist industry. They are also spiritual wealth. When a visitor looks at them with an historian's eyes, they bring back to life, for him, more than a thousand years of the history of the Ancient Mediterranean World. The special fascination of Libya for me is that, in Libya, one can study the past as well as the present; and in Libya both the present and the past are of the highest interest for a student of human affairs.

The other chief attraction of Libya for me is the landscape. I first set eyes on this in 1964, and, by then, I had been longing to see it for more than sixty years. Ever since I had been at school, Libya had been familiar to me from history-books, maps, and photographs, but one glance at a landscape with my own eyes tells me more than I can ever learn from anything printed on paper.

I found it thrilling, en route from Benghazi to Cyrene, to climb from the coastal plain at Tokra on to the south-western edge of the Jabal Akhdar. As we mounted, the climate and the vegetation changed. I felt another thrill when, from the crown of the Jabal Akhdar, I caught sight of the Marj. Maps and photographs had not previously revealed to me the size and fertility of this great pocket of rich soil. I was struck, again, by the contrast between the goodness of the agricultural land immediately to the south of Cyrene and the roughness and wildness of the country between Cyrene and the coast. Travelling back from Lepcis to Tarabolous, I noted how suddenly we entered a rich agricultural country when we had climbed the northern escarpment of the Tripolitanian Jabal. At this point I longed to turn southward in order to discover how far south the revival of agriculture has been carried. I should have liked to push on all the way to Fezzan. This is now the year 1968, and I am in my eightieth year, but I have not given up hope of seeing Fezzan too some day.

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