

Philby of Arabia

by Jim Filby 2011

Harry St. John Bridger (Jack) Philby - Tree M126

'Greatest of Arabian Explorers' is engraved on his tombstone, and few would quarrel with those words. The book about St. John's life written by Elizabeth Monroe is called "Philby of Arabia". We start his story where life begins.

Harry St. John Bridger Philby was born on the 3rd April, 1885, in Ceylon. He was the second son and child of Harry Montagu (Montie) Philby, born March, 1857, in Epping, England, and May Beatrice Duncan, born in Bangalore, India. They were married in 1883, in Ceylon, India. Montie was sent off to Ceylon in the 1870s to seek his fortune in the coffee trade.

Montie's mother was Mary Pondpa Bridger and known as Granny Bridger by Montie's children, naming their first three boys Tom, Jack and Tim. The nick name, Jack, stayed with Harry St John Bridger all his life. I will therefore refer to him in this story as Jack.

Jack was by far the harder working and brighter of the boys who went to a small prep boarding school. He won a scholarship to Dover College, but the headmaster suggested that the scholarship be turned down as he was better than that and should be entered for the Westminster Challenge. In 1898, aged thirteen, he was entered and elected a Queen's Scholar and ambition began to stir.

From Westminster he won a scholarship to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he met with some disappointment in his first year by only getting a second in Classical Tripos. He decided to switch to Modern Languages, a subject to which he could shine. After getting a first for his Modern Languages Tripos he left for an Officer's Training Corps., camp at Tidworth on Salisbury Plain, and finally to Burlingham House to take the Civil Service Examination, which he passed and was accepted for the Indian Civil Service.

After two years in India he met and married Dora Johnston in September, 1910, and on the 1st January, 1912, their first son, Harold Adrian Russell, was born in Ambala in the Punjab, and nicknamed after Kipling's, Kim. Jack and Dora had two more children, both girls, Diana and Patricia.

Jack was then ordered to Arabia from India to join up with a small force which had been sent a year earlier. The force was to achieve three objectives:

- 1) To put heart into friendly Arab Sheikh's.
- 2) To protect the oilfields in South Persia.
- 3) Block the passage of German agents.

When Jack arrived the oilfields were safe and some of the Arabs were friendly.

Jack now had to deal with a number of Arab chiefs and the most important were:

Mubarak, Sheikh of Kuwait, Khazal, Sheikh Muhammara, and Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, the Amir (Prince) of Najd in Arabia. The latter, of whom, became an extremely close friend of Jacks.

By October, 1916, Jack's efficiency had sufficiently outweighed his shortcomings and he was promoted to Revenue Commissioner over a much senior man. Jack continued to work hard and in June, of 1917, He was eventually sent on a mission to Arabia as Britain's Political Representative to talk to Ibn Saud, who later gave him safe passage across Arabia.

During Jack's time in Arabia he became great friends with Ibn Saud who eventually became the first King of Saudi Arabia. They became such good friends that King Ibn Saud Aziz presented his 16 year old daughter, Rozy Al Abdul Aziz, to Jack in marriage during November, 1945, and they had four children. During this time Jack became a Muslim and was known as Haji Abdullah.

Throughout his journeys in Arabia he continued to wear the local clothing in which he felt comfortable. He also painstakingly charted his every desert journey, not only mapping his journeys but describing the journeys in fine detail.

Jack's first great journey in 1917 was crossing central Arabia east to west from Uqair on the Arabian Gulf, through Riyadh, Khurma, Sail and to Jidda on the Red Sea, which won him the Founders Medal of the Royal Geographical Society. For safety during this journey they were advised to wear local clothing, also at this time Jack had grown a beard.

His second journey was in 1917 from Riyadh to Sulail and then back to Riyadh via a different route.

His third journey in 1932 was from Hufuf to Mecca.

His fourth and greatest journey in 1936-7, was from Mecca to Mukalla on the Gulf of Aden and back to Mecca. During this journey he was certainly the first European to have seen Abha, capital of Najran and the first European to reach Hadhramaut from the north. He also entered Shabwa, capital of the kingdom of the Himarites and Pliny's 'city of 60 temples'. Because he was a Muslim and travelling under the aegis of King Ibn Saud he was allowed to stay, but all other Europeans who visited the city were forcibly ejected. His investigation of the old city shows that there could never have been 60 temples, or anything like that number within its ancient walls. The ruins of Shabwa have not stood the test of time, this Jack (Haji) believed to indicate that most of the buildings were constructed of rock salt from the neighbouring mines.

His fifth journey was in 1951 from Riyadh to Midian.

His sixth Journey was 1951-2 from Jidda to Midian and back to Jidda.

A final thought: shortly after Philby's great journeys mapping Arabia with such accuracy and diligence, the oil company with its aeroplanes, vehicles and new technology could do the job quicker (though more costly). Seldom has such an achievement been so ignored and forgotten.

One sad fact about Jack's close friendship with King Ibn Saud was that Ibn Saud

wanted Jack to negotiate the oil rights for Britain, however, the foreign office would not allow Jack to negotiate as his rank was not high enough? How short sighted of the British? This ruled out Britain and allowed the oil rights to go to America through Aramoco.

He died in 1960.

N.B. *Harry St. John Bridger Philby's son, Harold Adrian Russell Philby, was the infamous Double Agent Kim Philby.*

Bibliography:

The Filby Association's research is on tree "M126 Joseph Philby" – no current member is listed.

The book "Philby of Arabia" by Elizabeth Monroe. ISBN 0 86372 239 3.

Mr Philby's New Record

Sent to us by Patrick King of Holbeach, who found this in The Daily Telegraph dated 23rd September, 1936

"Only a few months ago Mr St. John Philby, the Arabian explorer, was informed that his exploring days were over owing to his advanced age. Mr Philby is 51, and has replied to the warnings by completing one of his longest desert journeys.

I hear that he left King Ibn Saud's camp at Ashaira, between Mecca and Riyadh, on May 21, and reached the Indian Ocean at Shahr on August 29. As Mr Philby last winter motored from London to Riyadh via North Africa, Jerusalem and Damascus, he is probably the first man ever to cross Arabia from north to south.

He is certainly the first European to have seen Abha, capital of Najran, and the first to reach the Hadhramaut from the north.

Except for ten miles the whole journey was done by car. The chief obstacles were a barrier, 30 miles wide, of billowing sand dunes and a series of sand storms which assailed the party.

During the journey, Mr Philby reached Shabwa, capital of the ancient kingdom of the Himyarites and Pliny's 'city of 60 temples.'

The first European to reach Shabwa was the German photographer, Herr Helfritz, who, however, was forcibly expelled after only an hour or two. Mr Philby found that the inhabitants' notorious xenophobia melted on arrival of travellers moving under the aegis of King Ibn Saud.

He therefore had ample time for thorough examination of the ruins, including the great temple of Astarte.

His investigations into the size of the old city show, I am told, that there can never have been 60 temples, or anything like that number, within its ancient walls.

The ruins at Shabwa have not stood the test of time. This Mr Philby believes to indicate that most of the buildings were constructed of rock salt from the neighbouring mines."