Beat: Local

During World War I Revived by the Novel Bint Al-Maidi

Forgotten Battles in Mesopotamia

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USPA NEWS - Historical Timeline and General Context
The second part of the novel Bint Al-Maidi is set during a highly sensitive period in modern Iraqi history: the Mesopotamian Campaign, which began in November 1914 and continued until 1918, leading up to the arrangements for the British Mandate. According to documented sources such as the reports of the British Army General Staff (Official History of the War: Mesopotamia Campaign, by F.J. Moberly), the strategic goal of the campaign was to secure control over the head of the Persian Gulf and ensure the flow of British oil, especially with the Royal Navy's increasing dependence on fuel extracted from the nearby Abadan fields.

However, as is well known in Iraqi history, no invading army ever left the country as easily as it entered. The British forces were gradually drawn deeper into the country until they reached the outskirts of Turkey. During this expansion, many significant and complex events took place, most of which are unknown to Iraqis today. The novel addresses many of these events in a narrative-driven, historically grounded manner.

The novel utilizes this military backdrop to tell the story of the British 6th (Poona) Infantry Division, led by General Charles Townshend, which advanced along the Tigris River. After the Basra landing in November 1914 and the subsequent battles—including the Battle of Shaiba (April 1915), the First Battle of Kut, and the advance toward Baghdad culminating in the epic Battle of Ctesiphon and the harrowing Siege of Kut—the narrative unfolds.

The Soldier-Doctor John Levenson
The second part of the novel opens by introducing the life of John, a soldier and field doctor who is one of the central characters. Here, the author interweaves historical facts with local folklore, which tells of an English soldier who fell in love with a young Iraqi woman known as Bint Al-Maidi and either married or abducted her. However, the novel clarifies that the original story is far more complex than the popular tales suggest, and that the inconsistency in these accounts stems from the strangeness and intricacy of the events.

What distinguishes the narrative is that it does not merely recount battles as dry military history but instead weaves them into a deeply human and emotional drama. At its heart is the spiritual journey of John Levenson, a field doctor who transforms from a zealous soldier inspired by the crusading ideals instilled in him by Reverend Oliver into a spiritual figure who comes to understand the true message of Christ: peace and mercy. He embraces a mission to recount his spiritual journey to the world—especially to Christians—as a message of peace, in stark contrast to the image of a crusading soldier and destroyer of the Holy Land.

Through John's character, the novel explores the contradictory human nature of soldiers, torn between violent tendencies and moral transformation. He begins as a bloodthirsty religious zealot and gradually becomes a peaceful man who falls in love with the land of the prophets and the Iraqi people, eventually embodying the image of a Christian monk who dedicates his life to goodness and peace.

A Historical and Epic Narrative of the Mesopotamian Campaign and the Suffering of Its People
The campaign was divided into two forces: one advanced along the Euphrates River, and the other alongside the Tigris. By chance, British doctor John Levenson found himself with the force moving toward Baghdad along the Tigris, where fate led him to write the greatest story of the war after meeting the novel's heroine. His spiritual journey truly takes shape after he meets the nurse Layla, in a narrative that blends the harshness of war with an extraordinary human story.

Key events documented in the novel include:

- The Battle of Shaiba: This section focuses on this decisive confrontation, which nearly ended the British invasion project had the Ottoman Sixth Army (composed mostly of Mesopotamians) been victorious. After Shaiba, however, British forces secured the south of Iraq. Basra fell definitively, and Ottoman control effectively ended, ushering in British rule—with all its positives (scientific progress and modernization) and negatives (sowing and nurturing division).

An important observation emerges: although Iraqi soldiers served in the Ottoman Sixth Army, many were not ideologically committed to the war but fought fiercely nonetheless. The Allied army under Townshend achieved many swift and surprising victories, but Iraqi resistance continued to fragment, regroup, and strike back after each defeat. This made the war long and bitter. A chapter titled “The Shattered Army” captures this cycle with precision and a unique literary flair.

- The Battle of Al-Salman (Gate of Ishtar): The author names it this way to reject orientalist nomenclature for sacred geography—a topic deserving its own research.

- The Siege of Kut: The novel transforms the siege into a setting of extreme contrast—where the largest massacre and human grinder occurs alongside the deepest love story between doctor John and Layla. She represents the archetype of the Iraqi woman described in folklore as a symbol of Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian beauty and true love. However, the popular tale erred greatly. The narrator dismantles those errors and presents the true story of Bint Al-Maidi, who never actually fell in love with the English doctor. This unraveling of the difference between folklore and truth gives the narrative an astonishing power that evokes love, sorrow, and awe.

Conclusion
This is a brief introduction to the novel. While it may initially appear to be a military epic documenting war and tragedy, its core is a profound love story and a deep understanding of human nature. Written in countless voices and with many pens, the author recommends reading it with insight and an open mind.

As a reader familiar with academic sources, I find Bint Al-Maidi not merely a romantic epic but a sophisticated artistic chronicle of Iraq’s transition from Ottoman to British rule, from tradition to imposed modernity. It captures the overflowing rivers of Mesopotamian love, later dried up by devastating wars. It is a novel that deserves recognition as a documentary-aesthetic work linking major wars to personal emotional experiences—reminding us that every military narrative contains human stories no less significant than cannons and flags.

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