

*In memoriam*

Nigel Groom (1924–2014)



Nigel Groom, OBE, Arabist, historian, spy-catcher, and writer on perfume, died on 5 March 2014 aged 89. He was born on 26 April 1924 and grew up in Devon, where his father was a country rector.

Educated at Haileybury and Magdalene College, Cambridge, Nigel Groom joined the Indian Army in 1943 and served with the 3rd Gurkha Rifles and in Burma with the 2nd Karen Rifles. Joining the Colonial Service after the war, he was posted to the Western Aden Protectorate and in January 1948, on arrival in ‘Adan, was appointed Political Officer, North Eastern Area, based in Bayhan, a remote emirate bordering the Yemen and the central Arabian desert and accessible only in small RAF aircraft. His first duty was to superintend an operation, using RAF Lincoln bombers specially flown in from the UK, against a Bedouin desert tribe which had rebelled against the rule of the *sharīf* of Bayhan; the operation was successfully concluded after two weeks with the loss of one camel. His district had a troublesome frontier with the Kingdom of Yemen and at that time none of it outside Bayhan was administered, political influence over heavily armed tribesmen racked by blood feuds being mostly exercised by messages to their leaders delivered by runners. There were no roads or vehicles and travel was on horseback or camel or on foot. The area was

unmapped and virtually unexplored and wherever he went he would take bearings with a pocket compass for a sketch map of the country. His account of these days, in a well-received book, *Sheba Revealed*, was published in 2002.

In 1950 Groom took over the Northern Area, based in Dhala, which was regarded at that time as the most difficult and troublesome part of the whole Protectorate. Again much of it was uncontrolled tribal area with considerable unrest fomented by the intrigues of the imam of Yemen in pursuance of his claims over the whole country. In 1950 the British Agent for the Western Protectorate, Basil Seager, and his wife came to spend a few days of the Christmas holiday with him in Dhala's cool mountain air. An involved plot had been devised to murder both Seager and Groom and their escorting Arab soldiery at a lunch in a nearby village to which they had been invited on Christmas Day. While out for a walk with an armed escort the evening before, however, Seager and his wife by chance met the chief assassin, a *qāt*-crazed religious fanatic, and his party on their way to their assignment. The assassin immediately stabbed Seager with his dagger, causing serious injury, and in a subsequent exchange of fire the assassin and several others from both escort and assailants were killed or wounded. Groom had to signal to Aden for the immediate help of a doctor, who arrived after a five-hour journey over rough tracks normally never attempted in the dark, and for a substantial force of Aden Protectorate Levies to leave early on Christmas morning to help counter a tribal uprising planned to follow.

In 1952 Groom married Lorna Littlewood, the daughter of a British official in the Burma Government. Her father had died on the trek to India out of Burma after the Japanese invasion. Groom took her back to Dhala, where she was told to 'keep away from the windows at night in case of shots out of the darkness'. He subsequently worked in the Aden Secretariat handling Protectorate affairs, latterly as Assistant Chief Secretary. In 1958 he left for Nairobi ('like being on leave all the time after Aden'), where he worked first in the Kenya Cabinet Office and later as Defence Secretary in the East Africa High Commission, with secretariat responsibilities that included the Royal East African Navy, based in Mombasa, and the running of the East African Intelligence Committee. That job came to an end with the granting of independence to the East African territories.

In 1962 Nigel Groom began his second career, as an officer in MI5. Posted to D (later K) Branch in 1964, he was to spend the rest of his time, until his retirement in 1984, on counter-espionage work. In 1965 he was the case officer for an elaborate investigation, which uncovered RAF Warrant-Officer Britten as a KGB spy in a top-secret RAF station. The discovery of one-time code pads, short-wave radio schedules, RV instructions, sketch maps for dead letter boxes, and a document copier disguised as a cigarette case attracted much press attention at the time. Groom was then brought into the small team examining allegations, sponsored by Peter Wright and later given publicity by the journalist Chapman Pincher, that Sir Roger Hollis, the former Director-General, had been a Soviet agent. His investigations showed that, in every one of the specific leads put to him, the evidence was invalid. Subsequently he was tasked with the planning and supervision of all K Branch surveillance operations against the 'legal' Soviet bloc intelligence community in London; this period included the elaborate operations surrounding the Lyalin defection and the expulsion of 107 KGB and GRU (Main Intelligence Directorate) officers masquerading as Soviet diplomats in 1971. Thereafter he returned to the investigation of leads to espionage and was to become head successively of two of the investigating sections. With a record length of continuous service in K Branch, he ended up as one of MI5's most senior and experienced counter-espionage officers, with an unrivalled knowledge of the Soviet bloc's most sophisticated espionage techniques. Many of the major spy cases of the time passed through his hands. He and was awarded the OBE in 1974.

Nigel Groom never lost his keen interest in Arabia and especially in the pre-Islamic history of Arabia, on which he became a recognized expert. This was kindled during his early days in Bayhan, where he discovered many inscriptions and ancient ruins and supported the American archaeologist Wendell Phillips when he sought to undertake excavations in Bayhan, leading to the first major archaeological expedition to South Arabia. In 1976 he compiled an archaeological map of south-west Arabia, which was published by the Royal Geographical Society, and in 1981 he wrote *Frankincense and Myrrh: A Study of the Arabian Incense Trade*, which is now a standard work (Bayhan had been a centre of this trade). This was followed in 1983 by *A Dictionary of Arabic Topography and Placenames*, providing English definitions of several thousand Arabic words of topographical significance. He contributed regularly to the *Bulletin of the Society for Arabian Studies* and other academic journals, one special interest being the interpretation of Ptolemy's map of Arabia, and was one of the first members of the Seminar for Arabian Studies.

Nigel Groom's book *Frankincense and Myrrh* attracted the interest of an Omani company preparing to launch the high-class perfume *Amouage*, and he agreed to advise them on the historical background of the natural materials used in their products. This research led to a general dictionary-style reference book called *The Perfume Handbook* (1992).

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A much-enlarged revised edition, *The New Perfume Handbook*, was requested by his publishers for the fragrance industry in 1997, and he was later commissioned to write *The Perfume Companion* designed for a wider readership, which came out in 1999 with editions in several foreign languages. In 1996 he provided the questions for an entry on perfume in the television series *Mastermind*.

Although hardly ever ill in his life, Nigel Groom discovered shortly after his retirement that he had developed a rare leg cancer. There followed a series of major operations, culminating five years later in the removal of a lung, although this was not allowed to curb his many interests. Lorna died in 2009. They had two children, Adrian and Alexandra (Tina), and five grandchildren.

It was of course Nigel's life-long passionate interest in southern Arabia which brought him every year to the Seminar. His deep knowledge of the history — particularly pre-Islamic — of Arabia provided the participants either with a well-researched paper, or insightful comments and questions on the papers of others. He dispensed his knowledge quietly and modestly in conversation and made many friends. His fine publications are testimony to the man whose presence graced the Seminar over many years.

G. Rex Smith