

[Nigel Ashton](#)

Book review: in the name of oil: Anglo-American relations in the Middle East, 1950-1958 - by Ivan L. G. Pearson

**Article (Published version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Ashton, Nigel J (2011) *Book review: in the name of oil: Anglo-American relations in the Middle East, 1950-1958 - by Ivan L. G. Pearson*. [Journal of American studies](#), 45 (2). e27. ISSN 0021-8758

DOI: [10.1017/S0021875811000417](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875811000417)

© 2011 [Cambridge University Press](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/36612/>

Available in LSE Research Online: September 2012

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

Journal of American Studies, 45 (2011), e27. doi:10.1017/S0021875811000417

Ivan L. G. Pearson, *In the Name of Oil: Anglo-American Relations in the Middle East, 1950–1958* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010, £55.00/\$74.95). Pp. xi + 263. ISBN 978 1 84519 388 1.

British and American policies in the Middle East in the decades following the Second World War have drawn considerable scholarly interest in recent years. No doubt one explanation is the attempt to set the Anglo-American interventions in the Gulf of 1991 and 2003 in context. But the discord witnessed over the collapse of the Palestine mandate in 1948, the Iranian oil crisis of 1950–51, the Suez crisis of 1956 and the October 1973 Arab–Israeli war has also provided fertile ground for scholars seeking to sustain a functionalist critique of the mythology surrounding the Anglo-American “special relationship.”

Ivan Pearson’s book surveying the course of Anglo-American relations in the Middle East during the pivotal decade of the 1950s is a further welcome addition to the literature in the field. Pearson focusses on a series of test cases ranging from the Iranian oil crisis, through Suez to the Jordanian and Syrian crises of 1957 and the American and British interventions in Lebanon and Jordan in 1958. The essence of his argument is to play down the significance of the Suez crisis itself as a watershed in Anglo-American relations in the region. British policy in the region did not become subservient to that of the United States in the wake of Suez. Rather, the Macmillan government continued to pursue its own interests and strategy after the crisis, but attempted to coopt the Eisenhower administration in its approach. There was thus a tactical change in London’s handling of Anglo-American relations in the Middle East but no immediate fundamental strategic reappraisal.

This argument will come as no surprise to specialists working in the field. While Pearson’s book is strong in its use of primary sources drawn from both British and American archives, his treatment of the historiography is considerably weaker. Repeatedly he refers to “traditional historiographies” which maintain that Suez was a defining watershed in Anglo-American relations, arguing that he is in effect the first to challenge an established orthodoxy. It is true that a number of the key works on Suez originally published at the beginning of the 1990s, including Scott Lucas’s *Divided We Stand* and Keith Kyle’s *Suez*, do emphasize the centrality of Suez as a watershed in Anglo-American relations. However, Suez revisionism is more than two decades old. As long ago as 1988 both John Darwin in his *Britain and Decolonisation* and Anthony Adamthwaite in an article titled “Suez Revisited” in *International Affairs* argued that the crisis had to be set in context and that its impact was subtle and diffuse rather than immediate and clear-cut. Thereafter, almost all of the work published on Anglo-American relations in the region from the mid-1990s through the 2000s attempted one way or another to set the crisis in context. Missing from Pearson’s bibliography are works published during this period by Richie Ovendale (*Britain, the United States and the Transfer of Power in the Middle East*), Salim Yaqub (*Containing Arab Nationalism*), Robert McNamara (*Britain, Nasser and the Balance of Power in the Middle East*) and all of Stephen Blackwell’s research.

His lack of attention to the historiography leads Pearson considerably to overstate the novelty of his own work. This approach reaches its apotheosis in his claim that

“the well-worn discourse of Suez as a precipitous turning point ... has led research away from more detailed examinations of Britain’s role in the Middle East in the post-1956 era” (178). This claim is simply not true. Apart from the works cited above, there has also been considerable research on Britain’s changing role in the Gulf after Suez by other historians including Simon Smith and Spencer Mawby.

While Pearson does make a useful contribution to the literature in this field, it is one of reinforcing and refining existing trends in Suez revisionism rather than of overturning an unchallenged, established orthodoxy.

London School of Economics and Political Science

NIGEL ASHTON