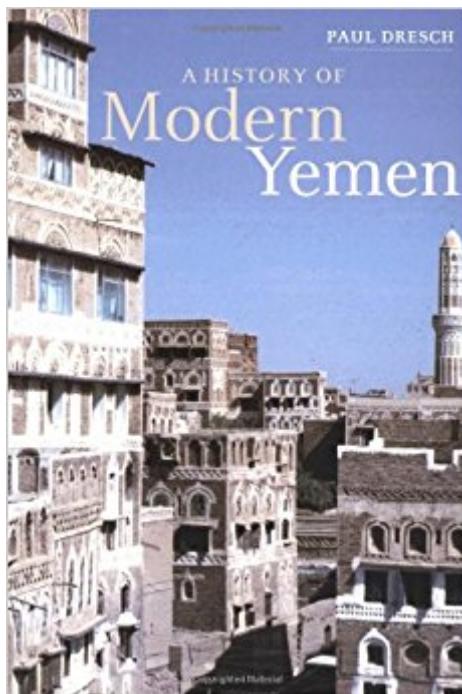


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# A History Of Modern Yemen



## **Synopsis**

Yemen's modern history is unique and deserves to be better understood. While the borders of most Middle East states were defined by colonial powers after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, a single Yemeni state was not formed until 1990. In fact, much of Yemen's twentieth-century history was taken up constructing such a state, forged after years of civil war. The book is augmented by illustrations, maps and a detailed chronology.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

'If you have time to read a single book on Yemen's recent past, Paul Dresch's *A History of Modern Yemen* is the one for you.' American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences

Yemen's modern history is unique and deserves to be better understood. While the borders of most Middle East states were defined by colonial powers after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, a single Yemeni state was not formed until 1990. In fact, much of Yemen's twentieth-century history was taken up constructing such a state, forged after years of civil war. The story is fast-moving and accessible, augmented by illustrations, maps and a detailed chronology. This book is for anyone interested in discovering more about a little-known slice of Arab history.

Written eleven years ago in 2000, Dresch's work is even more relevant today, as the "war on terrorism" which conflates with "the war for US interests everywhere" continues and finds a particular focus of tension in Yemen. While the author definitely describes the rise of Islamist schools and political groups in the imperfectly-welded parts of this ancient land, even a cursory

reading of A MODERN HISTORY.... will lead to the realization that much of the Western media have little or no idea what is going on there. I fear the same is true of the politicians and decision makers. Yemen is a most complex country, divided in many ways, but making up a society nevertheless. Tribes, religious factions (all Islamic), economic, military, and political groups create complex webs with a bedrock underlay of personal and family ties, making predictions about who will do what extremely difficult. Dresch tackles Yemen only from the beginning of the Imam Yahya's reign in 1906. Right there you come to a problem....do you say "reign" when speaking about an Imam, not a king ? Yemen moved from an Imamate with little feeling of nationhood in the modern sense, to being more of a kingdom. The British had occupied the port of Aden in the 19th century and gradually extended their sway over the entire southern and eastern stretches of what had been known as "Yemen", a region. When the second modern Imam died in 1962, modernists tried to take control, only to face a vastly confusing civil war in which both Egypt (military) and Saudi Arabia (money) took part. The south freed itself from British rule by 1968 and turned into a (would-be) Marxist state which still displayed firm Yemeni characteristics. Both countries lived on foreign aid and remittances from workers overseas, neither developed much in the sense of say, Korea after 1960 or Japan after 1868. Military and bureaucracy absorbed much of the available money along with corruption. Local concerns were more compelling than the aims of foreign governments.(p.73) A sudden unification of north and south in 1990 was followed by the first Gulf War when Yemen took Saddam Hussein's side and all Yemeni workers were expelled from the oil-producing countries. Further civil wars and upheavals continued and by the late 1990s, Yemen was a mess. Change is needed and many people feel that the Islamists can bring it. I may have doubts, but I do wonder if it is America's prerogative to say 'no'. Further intrusion into Yemeni politics will probably bring further desire to retaliate. (My opinion, not Dresch's.) The desire for change is evident in the newspaper every day. It is unclear if Yemen will get honest, efficient government. On the basis of Dresch's book, I would be pessimistic. But one aspect of one bottom line (!) is that the US has never figured Yemen out at all. Today they are operating much like the British, who made a practice of bombing recalcitrant Yemeni tribes, villages, or rulers from the 1920s into the '50s. It didn't work. Hello ?About the book. In one way, it is a wonderful compendium of history, politics and anthropology, with nice flashes of dry humor inserted throughout. The author's comprehensive knowledge of the country and obvious like for it gave me a lot of pleasure. This was no dry tome. However, in another way, one has to ask for whom it was written. A large number of names of places and people, certainly inevitable, are suddenly dropped into the text as if we should know who or what they were. I found the many maps extremely useful, but numerous places were still left out. Also, I happened to

have read Caton's "Peaks of Yemen I Summon", about the place of poetry in Yemeni society and politics. Though Dresch too uses poetry often to illustrate points and illuminate Yemeni thinking about matters, he never includes an explanation of why; thus, I felt that he assumed the readers would know about Yemen. Unfortunately, this is not a safe assumption.

I spent three months in Yemen last year and bought this book before I went. I'm glad I did, because it turned out to be the perfect primer. A HISTORY OF MODERN YEMEN gives a clear, accessible account of the civil wars throughout the twentieth century that preceded the union of the two Yemens in 1990; and towards the end it offers penetrating insights into the way a new upper class has emerged along with a new desperate underclass. Paul Dresch is also good at highlighting how, despite unification, a north-south divide continues to plague a drive for a true national identity. This book struck me as unusually accessible for the general reader/traveller considering it is principally aimed at academics.

I first picked up this book to validate its' authenticity, being from Yemen myself. To be honest, I learned a few facts that I was able to impress my colleagues with. Thanks!

If you're looking for a book to get a layman's understanding of Yemen then avoid this one like the plague. It is totally incomprehensible even for someone with a university degree. It has clearly been written by an academic whose target audience are other academics. This book is as dry as the deserts around Yemen--rub this one too hard and it'll burst into flames! I tried to read it 3 times and couldn't get past page 10. THIS IS THE WORST BOOK I HAVE EVER BOUGHT FROM . Now I have to buy YEMEN: DANCING ON THE HEAD OF SNAKES...which I understand is a much easier read.

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