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THE
INDEPENDENT

Cutting a dash in the desert

HUGH MILES Blood and Sand By Frank Gardner BANTAM £18.99 (383pp) £17.99 (free p&p) from 0870 079 8897 On the Road to Kandahar By Jason Burke ALLEN LANE £20 (297pp) £18 (free p&p) from 0870 079 8897

Frank Gardner had the good sense, from a writer's point of view, to do a lot of crazy things when he was young. This serves not just to make the story of the BBC security correspondent's life an interesting read. It also makes his scrape with death in Saudi Arabia, and ensuing paraplegia, a little easier to bear. His book starts on that fateful day in June 2004, as Gardner and his cameraman Simon Cumbers were practising a piece to camera in the Al-Suwaidi district of Riyadh. A car drew up and an Arab man got out, apparently to ask directions. As he reached into his pocket, Gardner suddenly realised what was about to happen and started to run. What happened next he remembers in vivid detail.

His graphic account of how his would-be killer shot him twice, then set about finishing him off, pumping round after round into his stomach, is deeply chilling. Cumbers was killed at once. Perhaps the worst detail is how after the car sped away, leaving Gardner bleeding to death, a crowd of Saudis gathered round and did nothing.

As a boy, Gardner became interested in the Middle East after a formative encounter with Sir Wilfred Thesiger on a London bus. Over Arab daggery and tea in his Chelsea flat the cantankerous old explorer launched into a bitter invective about how the car had ruined his beloved Trucial States. Gardner was hooked and a few years later signed up for Arabic at Exeter University.

Gardner's university career is a picaresque tale of gallivanting round North Africa, getting drunk with Sudanese boatmen, observing Ramadan with the Bedouin. He is perceptive, principled and polite, the quintessential Englishman abroad. He is also an expert at making a fast exit from a sticky situation, whether scrambling down a mountain to escape a flock of Sudanese vultures or ducking out of watching porn movies with an Egyptian playboy. Like Thesiger, Gardner holds a deep respect for the Bedouin and their values of loyalty and honesty. Like the Bedouin, he has a trunkful of entertaining anecdotes. His biography

bounces along like the view from the train on the way to Khartoum.

After an abortive interview with MI6, he falls by chance into banking. He flirts briefly with the high-pressure life of a trader on Wall Street, but returns to the Gulf where he spends a few blissful years surrounded by all the trappings of a playboy banker. Conveniently fired, he gamely embarks on five insecure years as a freelance journalist, with a young family to support. His big break comes with BBC World, after which events combined with his aptitude for Arabic soon propel him into a successful career in TV

Gardner had mixed feelings about the war in Iraq as, he reasons, it at least prevented Saddam from acquiring WMD in the future. He was not surprised by the London bombings and expects more Islamic terrorism in the UK. Above all, he is a survivor. This unpretentious memoir is rendered doubly poignant since, after a lifetime of productive relations with Arabs, one leaves him in a back street with his guts hanging out. It ends with an intimate, painful description of operations on the road back to a lifetime of permanent disability. Despite what happened, Gardner is a tremendous model for what relations between East and West can be. *Blood and Sand* is a fine introduction both to journalism and to the culture of the Middle East.

Jason Burke's *On the Road to Kandahar* covers much the same part of the world, but concerns itself with answering specific questions about Islamic militancy. If Gardner as a young man could be described as daring, from the little we glimpse of Burke, this author comes across as downright reckless. He is the consummate freewheeling journalist, who drinks, smokes roll-ups and the occasional joint, rides a motorbike and likes listening to funk. His objective is to shatter preconceptions and generalisations about Islam, overthrow the "clash of civilisations" theory, expose myths and show the humanity of all people, whether they call themselves Muslims or not.

He fulfils all this admirably well, taking us on a terror tour to the front line of conflicts involving militant Islamism: Gaza, Algeria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Kurdistan. He interviews a shady cast of characters, including a football-loving suicide bomber, a Ba'athist torturer, the Taliban and Jihadi prisoners. Like Gardner, he also tries for an interview with Osama bin Laden - and fails.

Burke's investigation starts in 1991, when as an aspiring journalist he travelled from Turkey into the Kurdish enclave in Iraq. He was, he confesses, quite ignorant about Kurdistan, but combining admiration for the Peshmerga with a healthy beer-and-skittles attitude, he spends a few weeks learning to shoot under allied vapour trails before making a hair-raising escape from Saddam's men. This is the first of several close shaves. He is, by this account, lucky to be alive. He comes under tank and sniper fire in Najaf. He runs in panic from shelling in Kurdistan. In Tajikistan, militiamen threaten to push him off a cliff, but he escapes in a Lada at jogging speed.

Much analysis is given over to un-picking half-truths surrounding Al-Qa'ida. But they are not the only myth-makers in the book. Israeli settlers employ myths when quoting holy texts'

al-Zarqawi tries to make one when he decapitates Ken Bigley' the Western media depend on them all the time. Like Gardner, Burke retains a healthy scepticism for the intelligence community and is angry at the government's claim that the war in Iraq had nothing to do with the London bombings. He is contemptuous of the supposed infallibility of the security services and regards attempts to circulate what they know to be lies as reprehensible. Analysing the Iraq war - the right war for the wrong reasons at the wrong time, in his view - Burke views the coalition's strategic errors to be in part the result of believing their own myths, such as the purported link between Saddam Hussein and Al Qa'ida. He even interviews a Kurdish prisoner whose testimony was cited in Washington as evidence of such a link and reveals him to be a savvy liar. Along the way, Burke arrives at more conclusions about militant Islamism. He observes that religion is most attractive when it is socially useful, doubly attractive when secular systems of governance fail, and that propaganda works best when directed at an emotional, not intellectual level on a humiliated and frustrated public. If violence by deed is propaganda, then spectacular violence is spectacular propaganda.

Like Gardner, Burke is fundamentally optimistic, deciding that our best hopes should be pinned on the vast silent majority who hold the balance of power in Muslim communities. The best weapons to fight Islamic militancy are moderation and common sense. But don't expect any easy remedies.

Hugh Miles's book 'Al-Jazeera' is published by Abacus

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