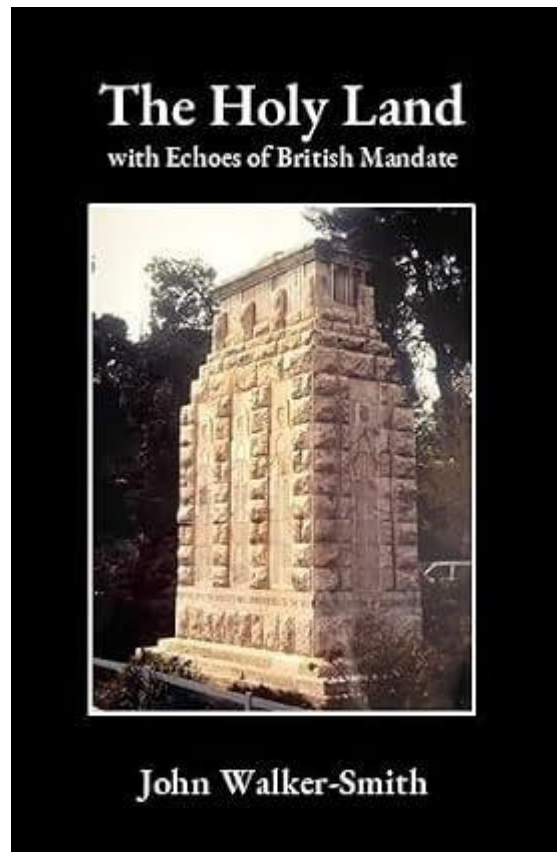


Friends of Millbank

Book Review

The Holy Land with Echoes of the British Mandate

(sub-titled: *A Doctor travels where the British trod*)



(click on image to order a copy from The Memoir Club)¹

Author: John Walker-Smith, Emeritus Professor of Paediatric Gastroenterology Publisher: The Memoir Club, 2025. ISBN: 978-1-8410423-3-6

I was initially lent a copy of this fascinating book of John Walker-Smith, published the year before the author's 90th birthday, by Col (ret'd) Professor John Richardson, together with John's own review and the similarly insightful review by Professor Almuthe Christina Hauer. I have enjoyed reading this book and these reviews, and also the thoughtful review on The Memoir Club website by Stephen Hickey, recently British Ambassador to Iraq (2019-2021), at <https://thememoirclub.blogspot.com/2025/03/the-holy-land-with-echoes-of-british.html>, and the others added below that (now including John's and Almuthe's).

This book is a thoughtful, easily readable, personal perspective (and significantly a tolerant Christian one at that) on the troubled Holy Land, its peoples, faiths and history. Its echoes of the British Mandate (the League of Nations-sanctioned administration of Palestine and Transjordan, 1920-1948, after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in WW1) also bring out well the Mandate's altruistic nature in trying to establish a home for the Jewish people while protecting Arab interests.

² The Mandate is certainly worth studying, see also: '*The British Mandate in Palestine – A Centenary Volume, 1920-2020*'. Ed: Michael J Cohen

³ Chairman, Friends of Millbank (2020-date)

It's worth highlighting this as the Mandate is now often wilfully ignored or mis- represented, despite its sincere and often heroic attempts to administer the region and reconcile the perhaps irreconcilable three Abrahamic faiths.² Is this really a naïve hope?

There are lessons and cautions here for post-conflict recovery everywhere, and it's extremely relevant for current and future conflicts in this flashpoint region, and their potential for spillover into wider Middle Eastern or global conflict. This book definitely provides a great introduction to this region and its challenges, which will stand the test of time, and doubtless will long be appreciated by military medical personnel and others with a direct or potential involvement with this region's peoples, so intermingled is their history with religion and deeply held beliefs.

I also love the way the author involves two other great travellers (Treves is an Edwardian surgeon of renown, who visited the Holy Land in 1912 during the Turkish occupation, and H V Morton visited during the British Mandate, in 1934). I have several well-thumbed books by H V Morton on my own bookshelves, not least 'In the steps of the Master' and 'In the steps of St Paul'.

My initial hesitation before featuring this book was whether it would fit with the aims of Friends of Millbank (we focus on the heritage, achievements and ongoing relevance of military medicine).

I am absolutely convinced that knowledge and insight of the Holy Land's history is indeed relevant to military medical practitioners (not least because of previous British military medical presence there, especially after Allenby's capture of Jerusalem on 11 December 1917). I was hard-torn to decide whether, as a thoughtful personal account of a conflict-riven area, it would fit better within our Glimpses of War section than within Book Reviews. I heartily recommend this book to you, you can decide for yourself.

The author is also to be congratulated for his imminent 90th birthday celebrations at Apothecaries Hall on 1 December 2026!

David Vassallo, reviewer³ July 2026

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“The Holy Land with Echoes of the British Mandate”
John Walker-Smith

This book has a sub-title “A doctor travels where the British trod”. In fact there are two doctors: Sir Frederick Treves, and Dr John Walker- Smith. It is a charming autobiographical travel guide written by the author when he visited the Holy Land as a pilgrim in 1964 and as a medical delegate in 1987 and 1995. He quotes from Sir Frederick Treves’s book about his visit in the time of Ottoman rule and H V Morton’s travel books in Mandate times; the latter was required reading in religious studies when I was at school. So, we have three sets of opinions at significant different dates in history. It is a book that I would have liked to have with me when I visited Israel and Jordan in the 1980s. There is nothing written about after 1995 as it is a travel memoir. All this is covered in excellent detail in the other reviews on The Memoir Club website.¹

John Walker-Smith is a proud Australian and Empire loyalist. In the First World War Britain and her allies fought The Ottoman Empire on the Gallipoli Peninsular in Turkey where they were defeated and forced to withdraw. The Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) fought with great gallantry and it forged the identity of these Dominions. At the same time the Suez Canal had to be defended from the Turkish Army which was threatening this vital Empire trade route. The Turks were slowly pushed back but they successfully defeated the British 60th and 74th Divisions at the first and second battles of Gaza with heavy casualties. The fighting line extended far into the desert in the East where it ended in an open flank and was the site of manoeuvre warfare. On 31st October 1917 at the Battle of Beersheba there was a pivotal engagement when The Australian Light Horse gained international fame by charging and leaping the Turkish trenches armed with their bayonets, before then dismounting and achieving a significant victory. There are a couple of photographs in the book of the Australian Light Horse.

I did not really understand the military history of the Holy Land after the fall of the Roman Empire. John Walker-Smith describes the struggles between the three faiths that share their beliefs from common heritage, as they strive for the control over the holy city of Jerusalem. Only in two brief periods of history have they achieved parity under one administration, once in the 13th century and secondly under the League of Nations the British Mandate in 1920. The British Military opposed the acceptance of the Mandate. Sir William Wilson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, said in 1919, “the Problem of Palestine is exactly the same as the problem in Ireland, namely two people living in a small country hating each other like hell”.

Ironically he was murdered by the IRA in 1922.

The British Mandate between 1920 and 1948 was a well meaning attempt to achieve harmony between the Arabs and the Zionists. Sir Ronald Storrs the Civil Governor of Jerusalem and Judea from 1917 to 1926 even held an annual service in the Anglican Cathedral for all faiths which was attended by leaders of the various Christian Churches, Orthodox, Armenian, Abyssinian, Anglican, Jews and Muslims, but this service was boycotted by the Latin Church; so much for intra-faith harmony! He ensured that the Palestine Mandate postage stamps did not have the British King’s Head on them, and all street signs were in English, Hebrew and Arabic. The initial good will was lost in the 1930s when the Palestine Police Force and British Army were subjected to terrorism culminating in the bombing of The King David Hotel in 1946. In 1948 the United Nations ended the Mandate to Britain’s relief and then the state of Israel was born out of Palestine with civil war between Arabs and Jews.

This thoughtful travelogue has brought back happy memories for me before the region descended into the political and military chaos that exists today.

Professor and Colonel (Retd) John Richardson