

★ **Wounded Tigris: A River Journey through the Cradle of Civilization**

Leon McCarron

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With a small group of fellow explorers, Leon McCarron followed the Tigris River from its mountainous source to its mouth at the Persian Gulf. His travelogue, *Wounded Tigris*, is a brilliant record of latter-day Mesopotamia and the devastation visited upon the biblical river.

Beginning in the Turkish watershed that is the source of both the Tigris and the Euphrates, McCarron and his team passed through ISIS-ravaged cities and villages in Kurdistan and Iraq. They spoke with engineers, craftsmen, Christians, Yazidis, and Muslims, documenting millennia-old cultures alongside the chaotic, militarized present. At the Mosul Dam, a Christian engineer confessed that Saddam Hussein's hasty construction and ISIS's recent occupation left the dam wall unstable, putting the lives of six million people at risk. Farther south they found Basra—once called Venice of the Middle East—bathed in poison from the polluted waters of the Tigris and the chemical exhaust of Iraq's largest oil field.

Mixing candid observations with glimpses into the ancient past, McCarron writes with a compassionate sense of place. Of the first Englishman to reach Birkleyn, the site of many Assyrian carvings, who “had not spotted anything remarkable” according to the Royal Geographical Society, he says, “it’s hard not to spare a thought for that...poor man with his eyes in his pockets, who overlooked the reliefs and found instead only a nice place for a picnic.” In contrast, the travelers in this book have their eyes open to sights large and small, from the quiet rhythm of paddling a traditional canoe to the lasting impacts of the Iran-Iraq War.

Documenting the reality of a war-torn region from a river’s point of view—including many stretches that are no longer navigable because of military ordinances—*Wounded Tigris* captures the peculiar beauty and enduring importance of one of humanity's first waterways.

WILLEM MARX (November / December 2023)

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