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Cradle of civilisation that it is, Iraq has also been a cradle of conflict for most of its known 5,000 years ? Saddam and Blairbush are just this end of a long line. We're introduced to the people of the country, the differences between Shi'ites and Sunnis, the status of the Kurds and the importance of oil all before Saddam enters the text. Then we move to post-Saddam Iraq and the nature of life for ordinary Iraqis (yes, there are some ? not that you'd know it from the media) as the country struggles to make sense of itself. The text is spiced by ?grounds for debate? boxes and the pictures are purposively illustrative, although bigger and more detailed maps would have helped. Useful/surprising facts are sprinkled throughout, perhaps the saddest being that although about 50% of the land is arable, only one eighth of it is farmed.

The thing about countries in the news is that, although we think we know a lot about them, we only know what the news media elect to tell us, with the nature and history of the country and its people providing back-filling behind the immediacy of contemporary events. So a background-book like this is very welcome.

Equally welcome is the sure authorial touch that Ponsford brings to it. A little background on this ? to me ? new name wouldn't be out of place ? nor would that name on the front cover. TP

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