



Source: Hugh Naylor, 'Tired of energy ills, Syrians doubt the west is to blame', *New York Times online*, 15/08/07.
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Writer/s: [Angela Piccini](#)

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I read my latest society piece to her:

One of the most unusual of the many distinctions secured by Blackpool men has been conferred upon Mr Philip A. Challoner, who has been awarded the Order of Ar Rafidain (Civil Division) by His Majesty King Ghazi of Iraq, for distinguished service at Ur during the 1935 tribal rising.

Celebrations were held at the Iraqi State Railway's Officers Club, which included the very enjoyable 'Lido Guest Night'. The swimming pool had a very attractive setting, with three green-shaded lamps casting a subdued glow over the swimmers and spectators alike. The swimming and diving events were most efficiently organized by Mr Shinkfield—an expert of international renown in his younger days, assisted by Mr Shorland and Dr Lanzon.

Later in the evening the prizes were handed to the successful competitors by Mrs Challoner. Cocktails and other refreshments were served, an excellent supper having been prepared by the wives of the British railway officers.

Events like this have kept me busy over the past twenty years. Every day something new appears or is celebrated: swimming pools, railways, bridges, parks, dams, oil producing facilities, sewage systems. Mile after mile of piping now snakes through the substrata, a modern root system for the city. It's like Nebuchadnezzar all over again. A hopeful vision of an efficient, oil-slicked city. But I still have trouble getting my own stove to light. I turn the metal spigot where the pipe shyly enters our kitchen, at floor level, half obscured by the sideboard. One and three quarter turns, anticlockwise. I twist the small bakelite dial beneath the ring, listen, sniff and light a match. Nothing. She brings in my bread, buffalo cream and date syrup and we sit awhile, listening to the hiss of gas in the walls. I sniff again. They're making coffee downstairs so there's little point in us trying.

I wonder about these things: the people and places that pipes, wires, tubes and concrete knot together. I've always been fascinated by the gasses and liquids that run beneath cities, irrupting in toilets, fountains and streetlamps. More fascinating still is the desire of kings to bury it all, to hide our fluid miscegenations, the mixing of my outflow with your intake. I expect that's why I'm assigned to cover these stories. The others are too afraid of contamination.

It's not just society events at officers clubs, by the way. I'm more useful than that. I can wrinkle the budget details out of the most reticent civil engineer and am party to the stone-by-stone gossip of the builders. I'm the first to hear when a contract has been awarded, a financier runs into trouble, an order arrives late. I know that the building of a bridge will always carry with it someone's death. I can see the glint of backroom deals in gin-soaked eyes. It all

comes in handy these days when it's safer to play every side close to my chest. Working for English civil servants is no longer seen to be the best career move.

So, when I'm not sitting in front of my typewriter or filing stories with my editor I think about pool heating systems.

I say goodbye and leave. We're on the third floor and I cool my hands along the walls of the stairwell as I walk down to street level. It's early, but after only ten minutes outside I begin to feel the heat radiating through my obligatory black jacket and my skin begins to prickle with sweat. It runs down the inside of my collar and I can feel a single bead work its way down the centre of my belly, making me shiver. I consider the efficiency of heat exchange systems and wonder whether this might be the way to make my name beyond journalism.

Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius are planning a visit to our city. I read about it in my colleague's piece and marvelled at their grand visions. There are tales of an opera house, a university, a zoo, a gymnasium. If I could arrange interviews with these modern heroes I could convince them that they need my ideas. All that reinforced concrete requires heat regulation. Now that oil and gas flow through the city our swimming pools could be modernised and my dream of a heated, outdoor, Olympic-size pool could become a reality.

At the office I remove my jacket, hand the Challoner piece to my editor and sit down. The one opera I have heard was on my father's wireless, years ago. We all sat silently on the rug in the centre of the floor as he tapped his knee and moved his mouth to the words. To us it sounded so strange and atonal yet he told us that this was what we must look forward to. And so it comes to pass, although I don't know who will sing in this new opera house nor of what they will sing. A zoo seems to make more sense with its collections of exotic, subdued animals. And if they build a university perhaps there will be room for someone like me, someone who can speak a couple of languages, is good with questions and can master complex circuitry.

The day passes on a hum of hot air and I arrange to attend the opening of another park. I will have a conversation with a city official about the government's plans to allot 160 square feet of green space for each citizen. With these parks will come more pipes filled with water for irrigation systems, with gas for cooking in the bright cafes, with sewage from the tiled public conveniences, with electricity for the little lights dotting romantic walks. I will at last be able to light my own stove to make coffee for my wife. I imagine the roar of lions and tigers on the night air in this city of a thousand swimming pools. I turn to face the future.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Angela Piccini.