

David Pryce-Jones On J. B. Kelly

[BBC Lets Its Moral Colors Show](#)

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Two volumes of [essays](#) by J.B. Kelly have just been just published. John, a New Zealander by birth, was a formidable scholar whose special subject was the Persian Gulf. He knew more than anyone else about the role of the British in the region, the treaties that had been signed, and who did what to whom. Early in the nineteenth century, the British put a stop to the Arab slave trade in the Mediterranean, and then had to decide what to do about the slave trade between Zanzibar and the East coast of Africa. John's account is scrupulously fair. Some British officials observed that Arab traders treated the African slaves quite well, that slaving was essential to the economy, and besides we had no right to interfere in Arab affairs. Other British officials, one of them Lord Palmerston the Foreign Minister, argued that the slave trade was a moral disgrace that offended everyone. This sense that we ought to do the right thing won, and the navy did its business. Whether or not to intervene to suppress the wrong-doing of other

people is of course still a red-hot unresolved issue.

In 1979, Ali Mazrui delivered the Reith Lectures on the BBC. Born in Kenya in 1933, he was a professor whose opinions were very much of his time. His speciality was to attack the West and in particular its culture, although it hardly needs saying that he made his life in the United States. In the Reith Lectures, he did his utmost to present the British in the worst possible light, all vicious exploiters, and people of the Third World by contrast in the best possible light, all innocent victims. In an unforgettable polemic, John Kelly responded that the Mazruis had been slaving on the East Africa coast for a thousand years, had resisted all attempts to stop the trade, and he was not prepared to accept moral instruction from anyone with that name.

Ali Mazrui has just died and again it hardly needs saying that in a fulsome obituary the BBC called him "a towering intellect." R.I.P.