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Book Review

Raouf Abbas and Assem El-Dessouky, *The large landowning class and the peasantry in Egypt 1837-1952* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011. Pp. xvii + 293. 12 tabs. ISBN 9780815632870 Hbk. \$29.95)

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The large landowning class and the peasantry in Egypt, 1837–1952, originally published in Arabic in 1998, is a synthesis combining sections and chapters of two earlier studies published by Raouf Abbas and Assem El-Dessouky in 1973 and 1975 respectively. Abbas (now deceased) and El-Dessouky were among the leading lights of an influential generation of Egyptian historians who came of age in the history department of ‘Ain Shams University in the 1960s. Themselves exemplars of the upward mobility that Nasser’s program of economic reforms had made possible, they shared a commitment to write a critical history of the social order that the 1952 revolution undertook to transform. At the same time, breaking with the theoretical dogmatism of existing leftist historiography in Egypt, they pioneered a new mode of agrarian social history grounded in detailed empirical research from Egypt’s voluminous national archives.

In this elegant translation of their co-authored work, Abbas and El-Dessouky argue that modern Egyptian history prior to 1952 was defined by a class of large landowners who enjoyed tremendous power to shape the course of the country’s economic, social, and political life. The opening chapters of the book provide a detailed account of the formation and growth of the large landowning class and the historical evolution of their rights to the land. That process began in the early nineteenth century when the ambitious Ottoman governor Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha and his descendants employed a variety of land grants to members of the royal family, political allies, tax farmers, and provincial administrators in an effort to consolidate political control over Egypt and augment state revenue for their modernizing projects. The decades following the British occupation of 1882 witnessed further polarization in landholding patterns. The British decision to grant full ownership to all landed proprietors on 15 April 1891 contributed to the development of fluid land markets in which favourable access to mortgage credit afforded large landowners considerable advantages in expanding their holdings. In particular, the auctioning of state lands to service payments on the Egyptian government’s debt to European banks provided a critical opportunity for the landed elite to acquire new properties. The book’s fifth chapter, ‘The relations of production in the countryside’, goes on to offer a fascinating description of the varieties of tenancy and wage labour arrangements by which Egypt’s landless peasants worked the estates of these large landlords.

Having detailed the historical conditions that produced an elite class of powerful landlords and a growing population of poor peasants owning little or no land, the authors argue in the second half of the book that on a broad range of issues, the large landlords exercised their power and influence to protect the specific material interests of their class. They correctly note that large landlords overwhelmingly controlled key offices in the government, and with the establishment of parliamentary government in the 1920s, they dominated the country's major political parties. They furthermore enumerate many instances in which the policies these landowners advocated served their immediate economic interests. But as the narrative progresses, these perfectly plausible observations are adduced to support a stronger—and more problematic—suggestion that members of this class were incapable of thinking or acting beyond those interests. By this line of reasoning, differences of political affiliation within the landowning class arose not from meaningful commitments to distinct ideologies or party platforms but merely from 'family clan loyalties or . . . purely personal reasons, such as to get on an influential party's board of directors' (p. 171).

In their starkest form these claims lead towards a depiction of Egyptian society prior to 1952 as little more than the negative of Nasserist state ideology. Moreover, the authors' own historical evidence seems often to belie their polemical assertions. At several points, for example, they suggest that Egypt's cooperative movement foundered on opposition from landowners who feared that 'these societies might undermine their dominance over the peasant population' (p. 130). Though the authors hold up the cooperative movement as a laudable nationalist effort to protect peasant smallholders, they fail to mention that many of its proponents were among the wealthiest landowners in the country.

When they conducted the original research for this volume, the kind of deterministic class analysis that Abbas and al-Dessouky employed was still common to scholarship in many parts of the world. In the years that followed, however, that framework was subjected to critiques from a number of distinct theoretical standpoints. That the authors saw no reason to engage with those critiques in a monograph published in 1998 is testament to the gulf that had subsequently come to separate Egyptian scholars from their colleagues elsewhere. This translation of a work by two of Egypt's most influential historians is likely to spark renewed interest in questions of agrarian history that have lately received little attention from Anglophone historians of Egypt. It is to be hoped that such interest may help reopen avenues of mutual dialogue and debate.