

RAOUF ABBAS AND ASSEM EL-DESSOUKY, *The Large Landowning Class and the Peasantry in Egypt, 1837–1952* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2011). Translated from the Arabic by Amer Mohsen with Mona Zikri. Edited by Peter Gran. Pp. 296.

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REVIEWED BY PAUL SEDRA, Department of History, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada; e-mail: pdsedra@sfu.ca

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The late Raouf Abbas was among the giants of history as a discipline in 20th-century Egypt. Author of more than a dozen books on modern Egyptian history, mentor to countless students in the discipline, and organizer and motive force behind decades of symposia and conferences—not least in his capacity as president of the Egyptian Society of Historical Studies—Abbas had as great an influence on the development of history writing in Egypt as his renowned forerunners Ahmad ‘Izzat ‘Abd al-Karim, Ahmad ‘Abd al-Rahim Mustafa, and ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Raf’i. It is therefore a matter for regret that scholars in the English-speaking world should have so little of his work available to them in translation.

Peter Gran, Amer Mohsen, and Mona Zikri have performed a great service for English-speaking scholars in editing and translating the work under review, coauthored by Abbas and his distinguished colleague from Helwan University, Assem El-Dessouky. Originally entitled *Kibar al-Mullak wa-l-Fallahin fi Misr 1837–1952* and published in Cairo in 1998, the book was in fact a compilation of works penned separately by the authors and published in the 1970s. Both had an enormous influence in reorienting Egyptian historiography away from the political and intellectual history that had dominated the field until that time, and toward social history. To have, at long last, this work available in English is important, then, not simply in enlarging scholars’ understanding of the material which forms its subject—social relations in the modern Egyptian countryside, and their bearing on Egyptian politics—but also in exposing the methods and concerns which have structured history writing in contemporary Egypt.

The book was, and remains, path-breaking, not least given the tremendously rich archival materials upon which it is based. These materials are drawn from Egypt researchers’ archival mainstay, the Egyptian National Archives (*Dar al-Watha’iq al-Qawmiyya*), as well as from the Archives of Egyptian Public Records (*Dar al-Mahfuzat al-‘Umumiyya*) and the archives of the Agrarian Reform Authority (*al-Hay’a al-‘Amma li-l-Islah al-Zira‘i*). The variety of documents scrutinized by the authors is quite literally breathtaking, ranging from land deeds, registrations, and transaction records, to taxation accounts and pension files, to the

investigations the Agrarian Reform Authority undertook into particular landowners after the 1952 revolution.

Arguably the central concern of the authors, in theoretical terms, is to debunk the view that social relations in the Egyptian countryside had an essentially feudal character during the period under examination, extending from the Muhammad 'Ali (1769–1849) era through the 1952 revolution. Abbas and El-Dessouky suggest these relations are better understood as a variation on capitalism, insofar as they had a distinctly contractual character. This suggestion is significant in that it represents a departure from the Nasirist analysis of social relations in the Egyptian countryside, which frequently invoked “feudalism” as a justification for land reform after the revolution.

Chapter 1, entitled “The Development of Capitalist Landownership in Egypt,” is a remarkably detailed and valuable exposition of the mechanisms through which the contractual relationship between peasant and landowner took shape. Despite the existence of feudal practices such as forced labor, the authors demonstrate that various lease and mortgage arrangements were crucially important in structuring the peasant–landowner relationship. They undertake this task very effectively by exploring the specificities of the gharuqa contract—a contract dating to Ottoman times that permitted peasants to mortgage or pawn portions of their lands to provide resources for the cultivation of the rest.

Chapters 2 through 4 furnish a highly nuanced portrait of Egyptian landowners as a class between 1837 and 1952. Abbas and El-Dessouky discuss how Muhammad 'Ali used land grants as a means of both promoting loyalty and expanding cultivation; how improved irrigation techniques drove up the demand for land; and how the expansion of credit through banks and mortgage companies permitted large landowners to dominate land auctions, notably those of the royal estates. Under such circumstances, large landowners consolidated and expanded their holdings through the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, they were loath to extend their reach far beyond the agricultural sphere, because of the risk to their standing that this might entail. Foreigners were thought to have a structural advantage over Egyptians in the realm of industrial investment, for instance. Specifically, Egyptian landowners were concerned about the legal advantages that foreign investors enjoyed due to the capitulations and mixed courts, and were reluctant to expand their economic activities into the industrial realm for fear that legal challenges from foreigners could cost them dearly.

Chapter 5, “The Relations of Production in the Countryside,” is of particular interest insofar as it explores the contractual relationship between landowner and peasant, initially set forth in Chapter 1, from the perspective of the peasant. Abbas and El-Dessouky demonstrate how small farmers were victimized during the British occupation by the credit arrangements through which large landowners had managed to concentrate so much land under their control: “The landowner would borrow a given sum from a mortgage bank at 9 percent; then he would divide it up, lending out small amounts to the peasants at 25 to 40 percent” (p. 127). Small farmers could rarely approach banks themselves given the need for collateral and the fact that they often lacked the documentation necessary to prove their ownership of land. The precarious existence endured by small holders tended to lead to the fragmentation of land ownership among them, given the notion that ownership spread within a family would reduce the risk of land confiscation by creditors.

Chapters 6 and 7, entitled “The Large Landowners and Politics” and “The Large Landowners and the Social Question,” explore the consequences this landholding regime and class structure had on Egyptian politics. Abbas and El-Dessouky marshal considerable statistics to demonstrate how large landowners dominated the purportedly representative political structures of Egypt’s liberal era. Despite varied party allegiances among the landowners, ideological conflicts were of little importance within the landowning class. Political maneuvering vis-à-vis the British, the Turco-Egyptian aristocracy, the nationalist movement, and the peasantry was determined not by ideology but by the common material interests of the landowners, which led them to embrace a laissez-faire approach to economic affairs. Ultimately, what Abbas and El-Dessouky label the “obliviousness” of the landowners to the everyday living conditions of peasants (p. 187), together with the flow of agricultural profits overseas via European commercial banks, would prompt revolution.

Although one is left wanting on the question of whether the 1952 revolution is properly viewed as a turning point in modern Egyptian history, there is no question that the work under review is a veritable *tour de force*, one well worth the attention not only of Egypt specialists but of all those scholars concerned with the nexus of land and power in the modern world. And particular recognition is due to the editor and translators, for having made a text dense with the difficult terminology of land tenure a pleasure to read.