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## **Book Review -The Large Landowning Class and the Peasantry in Egypt, 1837–1952**

The Large Landowning Class and the Peasantry in Egypt, 1837–1952. By Raouf Abbas and Assem El-Dessouky. Translated by Amer Mohsen with Mona Zikri. Edited by Peter Gran (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011 xix plus 296 pp.) \$29.95.

**Review by: Michael Gasper, Occidental College**

Many scholars of Egypt will immediately recognize the authors Raouf Abbas and Assem El-Dessouky as two of the most important Egyptian historians of the 20th century. Publication of this work is an important milestone for English language readers. Anyone interested in modern Egyptian social history will find the book indispensable. Despite all the recent innovative scholarship on Egypt there remains much to be written about rural social relations and the political economy of agricultural production. One hopes that the appearance of The Large Landowning Class will spur others to pick up where Abbas & El-Dessouky have left off.

The Large Landowning Class is a synthesis of two classic works of modern Egyptian history, Raouf Abbas's The Egyptian Social System in Egypt during the Age of Large Landownership (1973) and Assem El-Dessouky's Large Land Owners and Their Role in Egyptian Society (1975). This book combines Abbas's work on the nineteenth century with El-Dessouky's insights on the twentieth century in a single volume. Through an investigation of land tenure, taxation, estate building and economic and political activity from the late Mehmet Ali (Muhammad Ali) period to the 1952 Free Officers coup Abbas & El-Dessouky present the clearest account of class formation in rural Egypt to date. The main argument is that the large landowning class emerged from historical processes that culminated in "full landownership rights beginning in 1891" and it is only after this date when one can begin to speak of it as a coherent class (201).

The book consists of seven chapters and a conclusion. The first two chapters give a history of the Egyptian system of land ownership. Chapter one provides a general background on the development of the tenure system that emerged from a complex system of state-controlled, endowment and tax farm lands from before the Mehmet Ali period up until the end of nineteenth century when all land owners came to have full private ownership rights over their lands. The second chapter discusses the development of the large landholding class by detailing such things as the legal changes that enabled the well-placed to acquire and consolidate land into large estates and the financial and infrastructural developments that helped make capitalist farming increasingly profitable.

Chapter three begins the work of sketching out the social components of the large landholding class in Egypt. Here Abbas & El-Dessouky recount how elements from the Muhammad Ali family and “high-ranking civil servants, the a’yan or rural elites, the Bedouin Shaykhs, the Copts and the Europeans” (55) eventually came to form a single class.

Chapter four explores the economic activities of the large landowning class. It paints a picture of them as agricultural capitalists involved “not only in the production of crops for the market, but also the leasing of land, the adding of value to it through land reclamation and finally the buying and selling of land when it was profitable to do so.” (106). The chapter draws a picture of a fundamentally conservative class that only in the 1920s began to move into other fields of economic endeavor.

Chapter five looks at the relations of production in rural Egypt. This chapter gives a precise accounting of an increasingly exploitative system of capitalist estate farming and the social relations that resulted from it. Here the authors show how the corvée gave way to various kinds of labor contracts and tenant farming.

Chapters six and seven can be read together. Chapter six examines the evolving political power of large landowners and how they came to dominate “legislative bodies, including the provincial councils, the ministries and the political parties” (141). It argues that contradictions between the large landowners and aspirants for a broader politics plagued opposition to the post-1882 British occupation and that from 1919 up until the 1952 coup the landowners’ political goals were primarily aimed at safeguarding “their class interests” (173). Chapter seven is concerned with the “social question” (i.e. how to address the problem of a large group of landless peasants) and the ways that the state and private interests conceived of, and tried (or did not try) to ameliorate, the problem. The concentration of wealth...

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