

The Reading Rest Blog

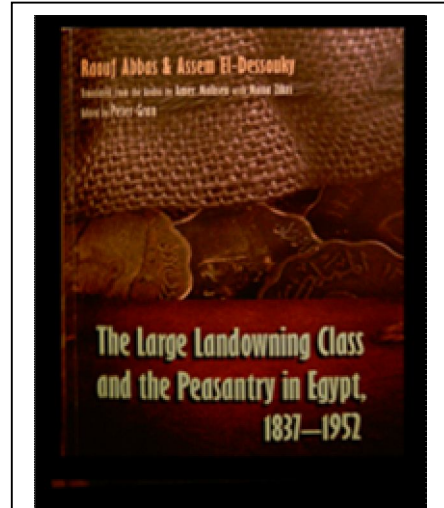
Forever Caught Between East and West?

26 November, 2012

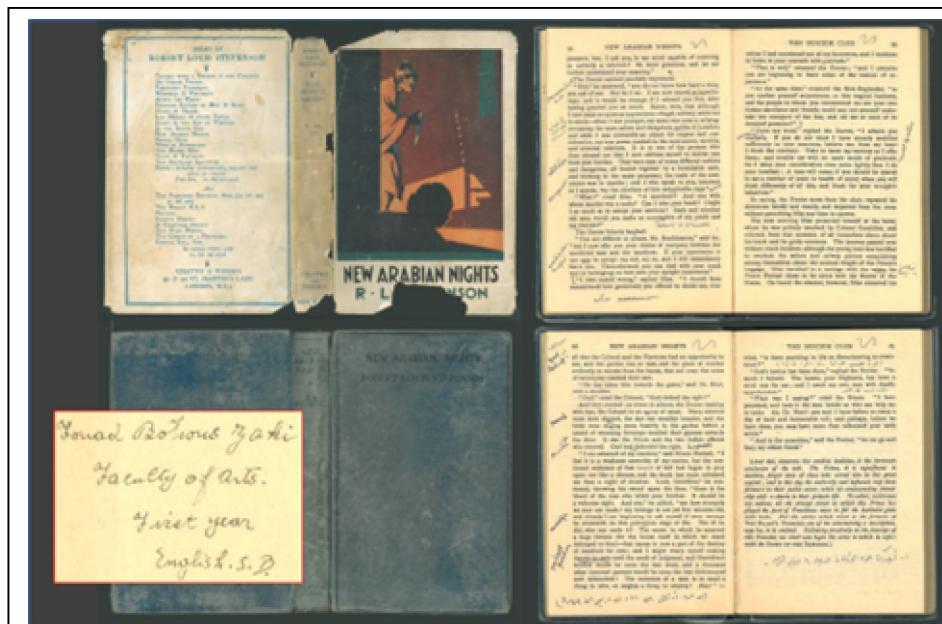
This week On the Reading Rest I have a book by Raouf Abbas and Assem El-Dessouky. Originally published in Arabic 1998 it is a compilation of two earlier works from the 1970s, one by each researcher. Both these works were about the large landowners and their role in the Egyptian society during a century. The books by Abbas and El-Dessouky were backdrops to the never-ending problem of agricultural policy in the Nile Valley. Now in 2012, after a decade of drafts, the book they wrote together has been translated into English and published by the American University in Cairo Press. One might have thought that themes and discussions based on archival research carried out 40 odd years ago were outdated, but given Egypt's present and post 1952 history new readers will probably consolidate its status as a minor classic.

Some years ago, having bought train tickets to Upper Egypt, I left Ramesees and crossed the square in front of the mosque, before it was made almost impossible, on my way to Talaat Harp. When I passed a small second-hand bookshop on el Gomhoreya I bought a book for my sleeper. New Arabian Nights by Stevenson, Chatto & Windus 1925, seemed the obvious choice; who would have thought it possible to find it – the book of commas and semi colons. Of course there was a reason the book was there; though little can be known for sure; a lot can be

inferred. The book was worn, like a much transported school book, but inside the cover, fallen to pieces, its once attractive dust wrapper was preserved, waiting to be patched together as the owner had once seen it and eventually decided to preserve it. The owner of the book introduced himself on the flyleaf; he



Abbas, Raouf and El-Dessouky, Assem. 2012. The Large Landowning Class and the Peasantry in Egypt 1837-1952. (Translated by Amer Mohsen with Mona Zikri, edited by Peter Gran. The American University in Cairo Press. ISBN 978 977 416 551 1



A young Egyptian 1938, a Copt, probably the right age to be named after King Fuad, studying English (short stories in a slightly pointless way), probably at Cairo University – Fouad seems to be 'Egypt' between the die-hard conventional concepts 'East' and 'West' personified. We may suggest that since he kept it, he probably liked his copy, as we cherish a wistful memory of youth and times forever lost. Perhaps he lived in a nearby

learnt English from book; the system was simple: students were told to find synonyms to the more difficult English words; Fouad Botrous Zaki succeeded quite often, and there are just a few Arabic glosses in the margins. Suggesting synonyms to Stevenson, nevertheless, is futile. From the date 'Feb, 9th 1938', at the end of 'The Suicide Club' we gather that Fouad studied English just before WWII.

Egypt caught between East and West is often a sad story not least while the stereotyped metaphor fits a number of Egyptian themes, contexts and a perspective that seems never to go away. Abbas and El-Dessouky's book on the large landowners 1837-1952 (LL) is a full-scale example. And still today, land and land ownership, despite attempted reforms since the 1950s, is surrounded by legal grey zones, hidden but predictable bureaucratic drawbacks, traumatic personal loss, and conflict. With hindsight and a view to social injustice it is easy to conclude that one shouldn't start a revolution in Egypt without having studied land owning and made up a reform plan. Perhaps one shouldn't start a revolution in Egypt at all, because radical change in land use, landowning, and tenancy seem always to breed inequality, inefficiency, and injustice.

Not surprisingly the overwhelming majority of early Muslim theological schools and scholars thought that land could not be privately owned, since rightfully it belonged to the treasury – the Bayt al-Mal – i.e. the state (LL:2f.). Later, Arab caliphs thought differently and acquired large farms, as their personal estates, for the payment of a tithe to Bayt al-Mal. And we can understand them; invested with power, the tempting green fertility of the Nile Valley seems worth possessing whatever theology says.

In retrospect, the period 1837 to 1952 looks like a 115-year fall into a modernity trapped between East and West as well as between state control and private greed. LL stresses the importance of the state on page one in general terms '... the Nile provided the Egyptians with the opportunity to build a society



and a state among the oldest and most centralized ...' and at page 212, the last one, when they sum up the period they have studied in paragraphs such as:

Development in modern Egypt history depended on the state. The state, to underscore this point, played a crucial role in regulating, controlling, and providing both the internal and external linkages necessary not just for growth, but for the very reproduction of life. One finds considerable disarray in times when the state was weak, but a measure of prosperity in times when the state was strong, a point that runs contrary to both Marxist and liberal theory. Consider the times of Muhammad 'Ali and the July 1952 Revolution, both moments of state strength and prosperity.

And they are right; but the moral question that arises from reading LL, also pertains to the inability of the socially dominant groups, eventually forming classes or social strata, to organize and develop with a view to Egypt as the country of the nation. There is an apparent lack among the large landowners of preparedness to fight for revisionism as the basis for the development of Egypt by means of the fertile land of the Egyptians –

that is to say Abbas and El-Dessouky don't denounce the large landholders completely. In effect this opens up the conventional East-West predicament.

The example of farming cooperatives is a telling one.

Privatisation of land, which was finally brought in place 1891, was advantageous for those who could invest large sums of money in buying land from the state, while farmers with little money were disadvantaged. Either they had to pay more for their feddans (a feddan is c. 0.42 hectare from 1861 and onwards) or they weren't offered land at all, because of the way the government constructed the land sales. Land was cheap only if one could afford to buy many feddans. Large landowners (with estates exceeding 100 feddans) became dominant, because in addition to their large estates, worked by an abundance of tenants, they could afford to organize transportation and export. Small landowners (with less than 10 feddans) and landless tenants, the fellaheen, made up the vast majority of the peasantry, and their conditions worsened because generally speaking the agricultural system managed to produce more, not least people, when the land was privatized. With this kind of privatisation, land became expensive to the tenants and small holders, who in practice had to farm the land of the large landowners before they could farm to sustain themselves on land they owned and/or rented.

Already in the end of the 19th c. financing was understood to be a major problems and somewhat reluctantly economic societies and eventually banks were created to the benefit of large landholders. Small peasants and peasants/tenants didn't have access to these institutions.

With high prices on cotton and the generous governmental policy allowing large landowners to thrive, production, estates and benefit grew. But when the cotton crisis became a fact after the end of the American Civil War (in the late 1860s), the lack of financial institutions open to the majority of the farmer resulted in parallel informal institutions (LL 35f). A large number of small-scale merchants, Europeans (not least Greeks), Syrians, Copts and Jews (not least European) went into the Egyptian countryside. They established themselves as grocers and moneylenders in villages and small towns. LL points out that these newcomers sold low-quality liquor too and that small holders 'found themselves obliged' to borrow from them.

We may blame the moneylenders, but a great part of the blame and indeed the initial blame must nevertheless be laid on the large landowners and the inefficiency and unwillingness of these capitalists, hiding behind religion and as shareholders in large institution, to solve the financial problems created by their own exploitation of the cotton boom. There is no doubt that the Capitulation Agreements with the Ottoman Empire favoured and protected European residents in the Ottoman Empire, but that doesn't mean that resident and Egyptian capitalists can forget about developing the country they work in. This is especially true of groups that involve themselves in the politics of what was in effect 'their' country and the large landholders deliberately made politics a matter of their own interests.



'Anonymous' shares in Wadi Kom-

The English protectorate and colonialism will always be targeted by Egyptian scholars, but the internal colonialism the grotesque colonial 'western' attitude of the large landholders was equally damaging. In the between-East-and-West perspective it is remarkable that the large landholders hiding behind traditional values exploited their country by means of European financial systems without understanding that in the European homelands these systems depended upon a number of liberties and rights, such as liberal views upon religion, educational and legal rights, and respect for equal opportunities.

One of these rights was the right to form cooperatives. Starting in Scandinavia in the late 1850s they allowed the financially weak to cooperate and gain some beneficial financial strength allowing them to take part in the economic development. As popular movements, cooperatives worked well. In Egypt, where the ruling classes managed to keep the peasantry uneducated and ignorant, the ideas of cooperation were unable to grow out of the villages and small towns. Instead they were introduced from above by the Egyptian National Party in November 1908 (LL:129ff.). The party wanted to protect the peasants from 'European Moneylenders'. The initiative was unsuccessful, not because of the European moneylenders often integrated into the local society, but because of the large farmers who interfered with the cooperative societies. Making cooperatives a nationalistic political issue rather than a popular movement didn't appeal to the English either. Again trapped between East and West the ruling classes in close 'cooperation' with government and the English administration blocked the equal opportunities of the small landowners. At the same time they indirectly showed that they understood the effectiveness of cooperation. Abbas and El-Dessouky would like us to believe that the ruling classes protected their own rights and opportunities, but it is far more likely that they didn't want to develop their country creating equal opportunities for more people, let alone everybody. They were against economic growth when colonialism became difficult to manage. Instead they were content with their own entrepreneurial brew which satisfied their need for a semi-feudal patron-client system: Taking capitalism from the 'West' and keeping the social system, which would have been erased by capitalism, intact 'East', they trapped their country between East and West for the benefit of their own power position.

When Abbas and El-Dessouky turn a blind or political eye to the question of the cooperative societies, in part blaming the moneylenders for the fact that these societies weren't successful, they are in good, albeit more prejudice, company when they quote Lord George Lloyd (LL:133), who began one of his self-justifying politically inspired (colonial) comments on Egypt by noting that a potential remedy for solving the problems of the small landholders lay in the cooperative societies, before he went on to doubt that the cooperative spirit could develop in backward communities (silently admitting to their moderate success and his own responsibility).

Still today, the inability to solve the financial and fiscal problems of the small landholders is a traumatic problem. One could start (even if it wouldn't please God who is probably against private ownership) by making it possible for small holders



spatially to define and legally to register their lands in order to prevent the frequent disputes over land ownership. This is not a small task given the insufficient cadastral maps and widespread corruption – i.e. century-old problems.

Nevertheless, as pointed out by LL when (in their day and age 'as long as') the Egyptian state is weak capitalists will benefit. They will benefit less when the state is strong, but except for radical revolutions (not the Egyptian springtime variety), they are always better off than citizens with less economic strength. Today, the Egyptian state is weak and appallingly trapped between East and West: In a fit of conventional West,

electing a president the democratic way, he fulfils his duties conventionally East to please his God and the nation taking decisions after consulting with everyone. An engineer, educated in the US, he has a plan too. It is all about the insecurity of indecision and power.

<http://floasche.wordpress.com/2012/11/26/between-east-and-west/>