

How non- Egyptians interpret Egypt's modern history :  
Critical review on John Marlowe, A history of modern Egypt and  
Anglo- Egyptian relations 1800-1956.

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In dealing with modern Egyptian history, non Egyptian scholars, Europeans in particular, tend to be mostly apologetic for western colonialism. Their approach to, and interpretation of Egyptian history are often influenced by a racial or imperialist point of view. In most cases indigenous developments are de-emphasized, misrepresented or dismissed altogether.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the above view by examining John Marlowe's work entitled A History of Modern Egypt and Anglo-Egyptian Relations (1800- 1956). Marlowe is chosen solely on the basis of being one of the most prolific European writers on modern Egyptian history. The work examined here is singled out on the basis of being the broadest in time span among Marlowe's works.

To begin with, the term "relation" hardly describes the true status of Egypt during the period. The term "relation" in its technical political sense implies independence and equality of both countries. Before the occupation in 1882 Egypt's ruler was a vassal of the Ottoman Sultan. From 1882 to 1922 at least, Egypt was not independent.

The structure of the book gives the impression that the author is writing 'the history of the English in Egypt' rather than the history of

Egypt, i.e. he examines Egypt's history in the light of English presence. For example, the author does not compose specific chapters on the Urabi movement, Mustafa Kamel's political role, or on the 1919 revolution. On the contrary, chapter five is entitled "The second British occupation", chapter seven is entitled "Cromer", and chapter nine entitled "The protectorate", refers to the 1919 revolution.<sup>1</sup>

Starting the study with 1800 seems to imply that the author considers that Egypt's modern history begins by the French Expedition (1798). The Egyptian historians who defined Egypt's modern times by the 16th century as well as Europe's history, are committing the error. They believe that the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1516 is the beginning of the modern period. But, during the three centuries of Ottoman rule in Egypt (1516-1805), no drastic changes were made in the infrastructure of society. The Ottoman rule did not differ from that of its Mamlûk predecessors in its general philosophy. Having attacked and undermined the old system in its infrastructure, Mohammed Ali must be the founder of modern Egypt.

In analyzing the British position towards Egypt before 1882,

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- 1) The book is divided into twenty chapters and postscript (468 pages): 1) The first British occupation. 2) Great Britain and Mohamed Ali. 3) The Suez canal. 4) International control. 5) The second British occupation. 6) The Sudan. 7) Cromer. 8) Gorst and Kitchener. 9) The protectorate. 10) An assessment of the British occupation. 11) The constitution. 12) The Palace. 13) The 1936 Treaty. 14) The second German war. 15) Egypt and the Arab League. 16) Post-war nationalism. 17) The morning after. 18) The strategic importance of Egypt. 19) 1972-73 in retrospect. 20) Summary.

Marlowe implies that England had no previous coveted objects. The occupation process had been a result of events which forced England to intervene. The Suez canal, he states, greatly increased, but did not create the importance of Egypt from the point of view of British imperial commerce, communication and strategy (p. 70). The most important question for England was to keep Egypt from falling under French influence.

In dealing with the question of Egypt's debt, which was considered by most Egyptian historians as the direct reason for the occupation, the author does not link the debts and the occupation. He gives the details of events as it occurred without analysis. It seems to me that Marlowe is reluctant to believe that the European creditors were responsible for the decline of the financial situation of Egypt and, consequently, responsible for the occupation of Egypt. For example, after the climax of the debt crisis, the author writes: 'In May 1876 Ismail (Egypt's ruler) issued two Decrees embodying his proposals to his creditors. The first decree, dated 2 May, provided for the creation of an international Caisse de la Dette Publique, with one British, one French, one Italian and one Austrian member which was to be empowered to supervise the collection and administer the distribution of the annual sums required for the service of the debt. The latter was to be raised from specific items of revenue. The second decree, dated 7 May, embodied a plan for the funding of the entire bonded and floating debt at £91,000,000 bearing interests at 7%' .... etc. (page 94). The question is, did Ismail arrive to these resolutions voluntarily without pressure from the foreign counsellors and controllers?

In dealing with "Joubert & Goschen Mission" of 1876 the author states that the mission arrived in Egypt as a result of negotiations between Ismail and the bondholders charged, on behalf of the bondholders, with the task of drawing up a revised settlement .... etc. (page 94). He tries to convince us that the British Government was so careful to disassociate itself from any responsibility of the Mission.

Goschen, although he is a British subject, Marlowe says, was not appointed by the British Government and he was merely a representative of the British bondholders. The reason behind the British attitude was, according to Marlowe, that the "British Government at that time was undoubtedly in favour of an independent as opposed to an internationalized Egypt" (page 95). This in my opinion is a failure on the part of the author to understand the elements of capitalism. A capitalist government is a government which recognizes and represents the interests of holders of the means of production who also control the legislative assemblies of the country and the state apparatus.

Britain, Marlowe believes, adhered for a long time to the policy of opposition to an internationalized Egypt. But after it became clear to her the probability of Bismarck's intervention to protect bondholders interests, she was obliged to change her basic policy. Bismarck informed Britain and France that unless they were prepared to intervene effectively in Egypt to protect the interests of the creditors, Germany would be compelled to take such steps as considered necessary to this end. Therefore, Britain and France were thrown into a panic (page 95-101). The paradox here is that the author himself makes it clear later that Great Britain occupied Egypt in 1882 in order to prevent the Egyptian Government from falling into the hands of 'Urabi and his associates, and to forestall the probable eventual intervention by the European powers in support of the bondholders (page 251). Marlowe then gives excuses to Britain to change her policy from keeping Egypt non-internationalized to adopting a policy of a neutralized Egypt and at last switching rapidly to a policy of an occupied Egypt. Great Britain's desire, he writes, was not primarily to occupy, but to neutralize Egypt (?), and this could only be done by protecting the bondholders interests. But the experience of the Dual-Control showed that this could only be done by military occupation.

I am inclined to say that England was deliberately planning to

control Egypt since the French Expedition of 1798. Starting with Mohammed Ali, the Ulama of Cairo in 1838 declared their full support for the plans to grant Egypt independence. But the Powers, especially England, adopted a hostile attitude towards the question. England eyed the growth of Egypt's might with anxiety. Egypt was a serious obstacle to the establishment of British domination over the coastal areas in the East; a menace to the British position in the Persian Gulf and the chief impediment to the development of Britain's imperial communication and commerce. The attitude of the 'Ulama was a reaction to the refusal of the Porte to come to a peaceful settlement on Mohammed Ali's conditions.

When England signed the Treaty of August 16, 1838 with Turkey, Mohammed Ali flatly refused to have the conditions of the treaty applied to his domain. The treaty gave the British exporters the right to buy raw materials at low prices either directly from the producers or through their commercial agents from all of Ottoman Empire domains. Mohammed Ali was also against England's plans for the creation of an English watering on the Euphrates in Iraq; he objected to various schemes for the construction of a canal across the isthmus of Suez and did not want to create a second Dardanells. He was fully aware of the canal's strategic significance and realised that the European Powers would fight over the Suez canal just as they had fought over the Dardanells. He resolutely opposed the construction of the canal as long as French influence prevailed in Egypt.

The powers struggle for hegemony in the Middle East and, in particular, England's desire to weaken French and Russian positions in the East, aggravated the conflict. England fought against both Mohammed Ali and France. By fighting against Mohammed Ali, the British hoped to consolidate the Sultan's position and change the balance of power in his favour.

In regard to the debt of Egypt or, to be more precise, Egypt's financial bankruptcy, in the Autumn of 1875, the world exchange reacted to the bankruptcy of Turkey with a sharp decline in the

exchange rate of all Egyptian securities. The capitalists of Europe predicted that the bankruptcy of the Porte would inevitably entail the bankruptcy of Egypt as well. At the end of 1875, the British Government forced Egypt to accept a special commission to inquire into her finances. Not to be left behind her rival, France also immediately sent her own financial commission to Egypt.

On April 8, 1876, the Khedive suspended payment of his Treasury bills. The government declared itself bankrupt and the creditors immediately took advantage of this to impose real financial control on Egypt. On May 2, 1876, the Powers set up a Commission to control the Khedival Debt, staffed by representatives from France, Austria and Italy. The members of the commission were called debt commissioners and had to ensure the timely payment of debts. England at first declined to appoint a British commissioner because her creditors could not come to an agreement with the French on the conditions for the consolidation of the Egyptian debt. The British bondholders had control of the main Egyptian loans, while the French and other creditor's share consisted mainly of coupons of the floating debt.

Generally speaking, Egypt's total foreign debt, by 1876, came to £94,000,000. What had the money been used for? Some apologists of Imperialism have suggested that it was squandered on the extravagant whims of Ismail Pasha i.e. on his palaces, harems, on luxury and ostentation. Others have asserted that Ismail began a country-wide campaign for the construction of railways, bridges, ports, telegraph, factories and canals, without taking into consideration the real state of Egypt's natural resources, and that it was this speculative company promoting that drowned Egypt in debt. It can indeed be stated that the Khedive overpaid huge sums to the European building firms. Thanks to the contractors, Egypt had to pay 325 million francs for railways that had actually cost only 75 million francs. The Egyptian Treasury had paid a European building firm over £2,500,000 for the port of Alexandria, while the real cost was

only £1,500,000. Other construction works had also cost Egypt two or three times their actual worth. The European building firms robbed the country shamelessly. The greater part of the funds expended on the building, however, were acquired without the help of the European banks. In the final analysis, the cost was borne by the Egyptian people.

Regarding Goschen-Joubert Commission, I would like to say that they occurred also from the Khedive the appointment of a British official, as the general controller of Egypt's revenues, and a French official, as the general controller of expenditure. This was termed Dual Control (Anglo-French) over Egypt's finances. A third official, an Englishman, was appointed director of the budget department in the Egyptian Ministry of Finance, a fourth, a British general, was appointed director of Egypt's railways. This small group of foreign functionaries began to dictate its orders to the Egyptian people as though they owned the country. The Egyptian Minister of Finance, Ismail Saddiq, who tried to protest against the decisions of the Goschen-Joubert Commission, drowned mysteriously in the Nile.

In dealing with the political parties of Egypt, Marlowe seems to be a little harsh on the Wafd party. He believes that the leaders of the Wafd since Zaghlul, were responsible for political demagogy in Egypt. Moreover, he criticizes them personally. He says that "El-Nahhas was indiscreet in his private, as he was irresponsible in his public life." The other parties, the Liberal Constitution Party in particular, had the able and the moderate statesmen but they, according to Marlowe, had failed to find a middle way between demagogy and autocracy (page 281-282). It is a problematic matter. The Egyptian historians, in general, believe that the Wafd was the most popular party within the political parties of Egypt apart from its political mistakes which were incomparable with the mistakes of other parties. These minor and moderate parties, were responsible for sabotaging the political life in Egypt and of missing the national



goals. Moreover, they were dictated by the Royal Palace or the British Embassy in Cairo. It does not mean that we are trying to lighten the political mistakes of the Wafd. Mohammed Mahmud Ministry of 1928 (Liberal Constitutional Party) is generally considered by most Egyptian historians as the most arbitrary government in Egypt (the iron hand government) because of the suspension of the constitution. But, Marlowe believes the contrary. He writes that Mahmud Pasha's Ministry proceeded to govern Egypt with the nearest approach of efficiency that had been seen for many years (page 283). It seems that Marlowe defends Mahmud Pasha on the basis of being a graduate of English Universities and on the basis of his understanding and liking for British life. Does Marlowe want to tell us that graduation from English Universities is the only qualification for a political career?

Marlowe's evaluation of the Wafd led him to fall in paradoxes. He did not criticize British policy when Sir Miles Lampson, the English ambassador in Cairo, insisted on calling Nahhas, the leader of the Wafd "demagogy" party, to form the Ministry of 1942. It was known that the British ambassador reached that resolution after the collapse of the Allied forces vis-a-vis the Axis during World War two. It was known also that the Palace in Egypt and his puppet ministers had anti-British feeling and maintained secret relations with Axis. So, to safeguard Egypt for the Allied Powers, there was no choice but to recall the leader of Wafd, as a democracy defender, to form the Ministry. Marlowe describes the day in February 4, 1942 as "the British coup d'etat" (page 316). The Egyptians who admired the Wafd did not hesitate to criticize Nahhas for obtaining the ministry through the help of the British.

Marlowe classifies the national movement which had evoked against British presence and Palace tyranny as a rebellion. This evaluation is typical imperialistic view towards all national liberation movements in every occupied country.

Marlowe's evaluation of the 'Urabi movement as a rebellion

is in contradiction with the data presented by him. He writes that the Egyptian nationalism which manifested itself for the first time after Ismail's deposition consisted of three separate elements; the school of Islamic modernism founded by Jamal-ad-Din Afghani; the constitutionalists who were a number of European educated magnets, and the native Egyptian element among the army officers (page 112-113). Marlowe then states that a kind of interaction between the Egyptian officers and the constitutionalists took place. Its effect appeared when the officers enforced the Khedive to invite Sherif Pasha, the leader of the constitutionalists, to form a Ministry and to summon the Chamber of Ntables. In another place, he mentions that the military movement was deeply influenced by the Ulama, but was specifically anti-foreigners (page 115). Whatever it was, it means that the three elements of Egyptian nationalism had been working in concert. My question now is, does the author consider the national movements directed against feudalism in Europe as a rebellion?

Marlowe states that the 1919 revolution of Egypt was a rebellion too (page 240). In addition, he uses the term "terrorism" to describe what was called "political assassination". I believe that there is a great difference between the two terms, i.e. the difference between illegal and legal action. Most national movements depended on violence to rid its land from foreign occupation, and the Egyptian national movement was no exception.

Moreover, the involvement of students in the national movement is considered by Marlowe as "agitation and blackmail" (page 202). He states that it became an economic necessity for the student to blackmail the government into providing them with employment. Trying to trace the factors which might be behind the situation, Marlowe attributes it to the educational system in Egypt which provided a surplus of secondary school graduates with no skills. Therefore, he writes, the only prospect of secure employment for those people was in government service apart from a limited number of openings

in commerce and the professions. Whatever the reasons were, the question which poses itself is: who was responsible for the educational system in Egypt at that time?

The sectarian division of the Egyptian population was an old game used by the British politicians and they succeeded in dividing the Egyptian people in order to rule them. Marlowe and other Western writers use the same game. In dealing with the Egyptian national movement, for instance, Marlowe states that Boutros Ghali the coptic prime minister of Egypt 1910, was assassinated by a fanatic Moslem (page 202). As a matter of fact Ghali was chosen by the nationals for political reasons such as presiding over the Denshiway court and being an obedient tool of British policy, and for his violent measures against the national liberation movement. The emergency laws of 1909 which were directed especially against the nationalists provided the "legal" basis for mass persecutions. The law of March 25, 1909 virtually deprived the Egyptian press of all rights to criticize the British authorities. The law of July 4, 1909, on suspicious persons, permitted the authorities to exile without trial or investigation anyone suspected of sympathy with the nationalists.

Working on the Indian pattern, Gorst used the assassination to whip up hostility between the Copts and Moslems by turning the incident into a question of strife between the two religious sects.

Most Western writers believe that Arabism is limited only to the Asian part of the Arab world; the so called "Middle East." The African part of the Arab world is general divided by the same scholars into three sections: Egypt, the Sudan and North Africa which embodied Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. This fragmentation of the Arab world, however, is difficult to understand in the light of any known theory of nationalism since the 19th century. On the other hand this fragmentation neglects completely the essential factors of common language and history which were used by the theorists of nationalism as the basis of nationalism. As a matter of fact Marlowe dismisses it altogether. He writes that at

practically no historical, cultural, racial or other ties between Egypt and Palestine. To an Egyptian, Palestine was a country as foreign as America was to England. There was no such common bond - except that of language - between the Palestine Arabs and the Egyptians of any class (page 328). I think that Marlowe perhaps applies the geographical measure of unification because the cultural ties mentioned above are derived naturally from the mutual language.

Finally, apart from the controversial points stated above, Marlowe has some objective points against British policy in Egypt. He states, for instance, that the record of General Fraser's expedition 1807 is one of the most melancholy in British military history (page 33). Regarding Denshiway incident 1906 he believes that it was the biggest blunder and the worst crime which Great Britain has ever committed in Egypt (page 169). Regarding the declaration of the protectorate on Egypt 1914 it was a unilateral act by Britain because the assumption of a protectorate by a great power over a small one was only valid if the small power had requested such a step to be taken. No such request was made by the Egyptian Government or by any other Egyptian body (page 216).

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