

2-1-1999

La France et l'Égypte de 1882 à 1914: Intérêts économiques et implications politiques, by Samir Saul

Michael S. Smith

University of South Carolina - Columbia, smithm@mailbox.sc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/hist_facpub



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Publication Info

Published in *American Historical Review*, Volume 104, Issue 1, 1999, pages 288-289.

<http://www.indiana.edu/~ahrweb/>

© 1999 by University of Chicago Press

This Book Review is brought to you by the History, Department of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

lights Egyptian contributions to the city's development and emphasizes the integration of this city into the economic, political, and social fabric of Egyptian society. He argues that the city's history during this seventy-five-year period demonstrates a fundamental paradox of colonial urbanism. The city became more cosmopolitan, more Mediterranean, more closely linked to the European economic system, but also more closely integrated into the mainstream of Egypt's evolving economy and society. "Alexandria was, in sum, both a bridgehead of European colonialism and a crucible of Egyptian national integration and identity" (p. 3).

A few problems can be mentioned, but they do not lessen the value of this study. Reimer's focus throughout his all-too-brief analysis, parts of which have been published previously in four separate articles, is on the city as a social, geographical, and economic entity; the emphasis is on the contributions of the Egyptian government, not of Egyptians. This is a problem that the author acknowledges in his preface.

One anachronism ought to be mentioned. It is technically incorrect to refer to Muhammad 'Ali, Sa'id, and 'Abbas as *khedive* (viceroy); they remained *wazirs*, or *pashas* (governors). It was Isma'il (1863–1879) who acquired the more exalted title of *khedive* from the Ottoman government.

The nine maps, reduced from nineteenth-century works, are not always clear, making place names difficult to read. The brief comparison of "colonial" Alexandria with Beirut and Saigon in the conclusion appears out of place, an afterthought, included perhaps to give the work a theoretical foundation and a broader readership.

Based on both local government records and European (mainly British) consular reports, this study is a useful review of Alexandria's phenomenal growth in the nineteenth century, prior to the British occupation. Reimer successfully integrates the findings of numerous English, French (though there are some surprising omissions of French scholarship), and Egyptian scholars, and adds his own analysis of this city's dynamic modern history, making this book a useful addition to the short list of works in English on this revitalized port.

DANIEL CRECELIUS
California State University,
Los Angeles

SAMIR SAUL. *La France et l'Égypte de 1882 à 1914: Intérêts économiques et implications politiques*. Foreword by JACQUES THOBIE. Paris: Ministère de l'Économie des Finances et de l'Industrie. 1997. Pp. xix, 787. 249 fr.

This is the latest in a long line of French doctoral theses that have explored the role of economic interest in the foreign relations and overseas expansion of France in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Following the lead of his mentor, Jacques

Thobie (*Intérêts et impérialisme français dans l'Empire ottoman, 1895–1914* [1977]), Samir Saul takes a Marxian approach to imperialism, portraying it as the inevitable by product of capitalist expansion. But Saul's use of the Marxian model is nuanced and sophisticated. In his account, government officials are motivated as much by *raison d'état* as by economic concerns, and they rarely act simply as capitalist stooges. Moreover, Saul is sensitive to the contradictions and crosscurrents in the activity of European capitalists abroad. For example, he makes much of the inherent conflict between financiers, who promoted the cultivation and export of cotton in Egypt to provide revenues to service the foreign debt, and entrepreneurs like Ernest Cronier, who promoted sugar cultivation as the basis of a more diversified and industrialized national economy.

Instead of telling the story of French activity in Egypt in a single narrative, Saul presents a group of parallel narratives, arranged in three parts. Part one provides a comprehensive overview of French (and Belgian) enterprise in Egypt in the period from 1882 to 1914. Saul shows that, whereas earlier French enterprise in Egypt was mainly the work of expatriate merchant capitalists and what he calls *sociétés articulées* (joint stock companies organized and directed from France), the new French enterprise that appeared after 1882 was mainly the work of wholly-owned subsidiaries of European companies and *sociétés extra-muros* (companies organized in France and dependent on French capital but managed in Egypt by Egyptian nationals or resident aliens). These ventures ran the gamut from department stores operated by Orosdi-Back to the tramways built in Alexandria by Thomson-Houston and the resort of Heliopolis ("Sun City") developed by the Empain group, but the greatest number were found in commercial and mortgage banking.

Part two is a triptych that traces the histories of the three largest French enterprises in Egypt: the Suez Company, the Crédit Foncier Égyptien, and the Sucreries de l'Égypte. Going far beyond what Hubert Bonin presented on this period in his authorized history of the Suez Company (*Suez, du canal à la finance, 1858–1987* [1987]), Saul shows how the company managed to preserve its independence from both the French and British governments (no mean feat since the British government was the largest single shareholder) and how it sustained its extraordinary profitability in the face of strong pressure from shipping companies to lower its tolls. Nearly as successful was the Crédit Foncier Égyptien (CFE), founded in 1880 by two local bankers with the support of the leading Paris banks to make mortgage loans to Egyptian landlords. After suffering through hard times in the 1880s and 1890s, the CFE expanded rapidly in the boom of the early 1900s, emerging by 1913 as the largest bank in Egypt and the principal conduit for French investment in the Egyptian economy.

In contrast to the distinctly local character of the

CFE, the third largest French firm in Egypt, the Sucreries d'Égypte, was a subsidiary of the Say Sugar Company of Paris, the largest sugar refiner in Europe, and it played a key role in the scheme of Say's president, Ernest Cronier, to make Say the dominant supplier of refined sugar in the Mediterranean and Middle East. However, this scheme collapsed in 1905 when a speculative bubble in sugar burst, Cronier committed suicide, and the Sucreries d'Égypte were forced into bankruptcy. In the subsequent reorganization, effective control passed to local capitalists who downsized the company and reoriented it toward serving the Egyptian market.

In part three, Saul tells the story of the triangular relations among the British, French, and Egyptian governments in the era of the British occupation. These relations centered on the management of the Egyptian state debt, which Saul calls "the principal historical personage of the period" (p. 539). For twenty years following the British takeover, France sought to use its position on the Debt Commission to bring the British occupation to an end, while Britain worked just as hard to eliminate French influence in Egyptian affairs. Eventually, Saul shows, the Entente Cordiale of 1904 brought a compromise: in return for British support of France in Morocco, France dropped its opposition to British control of the Egyptian government and acknowledged that the Debt Commission (and thus France) would play a declining role in Egyptian finance as the original state debts were retired. Even so, in both the public and private spheres, the French continued to be the principal foreign investors in Egypt right down to 1956.

This book is based on exhaustive research in British, Belgian, Egyptian, and French archives, including some not previously exploited (e.g., the Suez Company archives), and it presents much new information on the topics it covers. Unfortunately, the sheer mass of detail sometimes obscures the narrative line. Indeed, seemingly no aspect of each and every bond issue, stock flotation, and bank syndication goes unreported, so the book often reads more like a financial statement than history. But specialists in Egyptian economic history and historians of international business will find the book to be a treasure trove of useful data, and it should long serve as the standard reference on Franco-Egyptian economic and financial relations in the pre-World War I era.

MICHAEL S. SMITH
University of South Carolina

DAVID B. EDWARDS. *Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier*. (Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies, number 21.) Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. 1996. Pp. xv, 307.

This book, sophisticated, lucid, and compassionate, should be read by more than specialists in Afghanistan. For them, undoubtedly, it is a must. Although the

focus is the late nineteenth century, and the book was written before the rise of Taliban, its evidence comes from the chaotic shanty towns of the Peshawar refugee camps, the matrix of that puzzling movement. It is, however, history rather than current affairs that the book most serves in its specific analyses of tribalism, kingship, and religious enthusiasm. For these are themes, not only of the northwest frontier, but of the Islamic world. David B. Edwards is an anthropologist, and anthropology privileges the particular, but he cannot escape theory and comparison, so that his conclusions reach a high level of generality. The book's subtitle is minimalist. Morality is perhaps not the right word, although it is difficult to suggest a better. Values is too vague, legitimacy too political, and axiology too technical. What Edwards is concerned with is the morality behind morality, the systemic values that precede particular value judgements, the implicit social metaphysics that condition both behavior and its subsequent narration. It is a measure of Edwards's quality that he conveys these ideas without pretension or jargon.

The book is built around three short texts illustrating the value of tribal honor, kingship, and dervish Islam. Edwards does not believe that texts have no point of contact with any reality, so that history becomes literary criticism. Nor does he believe in the primacy of the text, so that history becomes *Quellenforschungen* and exegesis. What Edwards does believe is that texts, however bizarre, are evidence not only for the events they purport to relate but also for the structures of apprehension of their narrators. Those structures, he insists, are not necessarily coherent, either in themselves or with other structures applied by the same people in different contexts. Hence the metaphor of fault lines and tectonic plate interaction.

The first text relates a tribal revenge. It displays the imperatives and constraints of honor: the ethos of the petty nobility of the lineages, the *qaums*, which dominated Pakistan society at the grassroots. Edwards writes that "Few British officers and even fewer journalists were familiar with the cultural dynamics of honor among the frontier tribes" (p. 208), but *Blackwood's Magazine*, widely read by raj personnel, published many articles built around such stories, albeit less adequately conceptualized. The second text is a proclamation of Amir Abdur Rahman, the founder of the semi-modern, half-traditional Afghan monarchy: royal, military, meritocratic even, territorially delimited, a state among states, a nation state, but without a nation. Here the dominant virtues demanded were gratitude, obedience, and loyalty. Edwards underscores the appeal by the Amir to God as the source of authority, but I was more struck by the secularity of the document. In Islamdom, unlike Christendom, sultans were profane rather than consecrated, hence their lack of legitimacy. In both civilizations, the divine right of kings was a vehicle of secularization, in that it asserted a unique charisma and denied that of others, whether