

From Enlightened to Despot: The Shifting Orientalist Portrayals of Ismail Pasha, the Khedive of Egypt

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In prefacing his work, *Egypt under Ismail: A Romance of History*, the author James Carlile McCoan explains why he calls his history a “romance:”

For nothing in modern experience – East or West – parallels the splendid extravagance, the despotic cruelties, or the loan-mongering spoliation that distinguished this particular period in Egypt, the story of which may, therefore, well read like a romance, though historically true.¹

While the Ismail’s would ultimately be defined by the non-romantic concept of runaway debt, McCoan’s portrayal of Ismail Pasha’s rule over Egypt did not serve only to tantalize potential readers. Instead, McCoan’s portrayal was of the Egyptian “East” was part and parcel with the wider phenomena known as Orientalism. Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said, is “a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience.”² Simply put, orientalism is not defined by what the East is, but what the West is defined against. More important, orientalism functions as a “mode of discourse” that supports and legitimizes academic, artistic, and institutional styles, many used to justify the colonization of the East.³ Through academic orientalism, notions of “Oriental despotism, Oriental splendor, cruelty, sensuality” emerge that would become shorthand to distill the myriad differences of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East into formulaic shibboleths. Ismail Pasha became a classic example of the mode by which Eastern rulers were defined by orientalism. It was not simply that all Easterners were shoehorned into these caricatures. Even when an Easterner moved away from stereotypical oriental norms, he was still contrasted against these imageries. Ultimately, Ismail’s celebrated reputation as a progressive and civil abolitionist would be undermined by the “typical” wastefulness of an oriental despot. This study presents how these contradictory depictions nonetheless were in keeping with orientalist norms.

Before continuing, a summarization for the reign of Ismail Pasha is warranted. Ismail

¹ J. C. McCoan, *Egypt Under Ismail, A Romance of History*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1889: 13

² Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1.

³ Said, *Orientalism*, 2.

Pasha was appointed the *wali* (governor) of Egypt in January 1863 following the death of his uncle, Said Pasha. Ismail was the son of Ibrahim Pasha, and the grandson of Muhammad Ali Pasha, the founder of the ruling dynasty of Egypt. Muhammad Ali, nominally a vassal and governor for the Ottomans, nonetheless created an independent power base that made him the most powerful figure in the Middle East. Expanding in Arabia, the modern Sudan, and Crete, Muhammad Ali would eventually engage the Ottomans in a series of wars through the 1830s that saw the Egyptians conquer into the heartland of Anatolia.⁴ Despite a British-backed peace settlement in 1841, Muhammad Ali retained his position and made the governorship of Egypt a hereditary office for his descendants.⁵ As the fourth ruler of the dynasty, Ismail oversaw the construction of the Suez Canal and a brief boom of cotton exportation, caused by the European demand exacerbated by the American Civil War.⁶ In 1867, Ismail received the further title of Khedive, which was translated by English-language contemporaries as “Viceroy.”⁷ During his reign, Egyptian rule expanded into Sudan, with costly military expeditions and infrastructure projects greatly burdening the finances of state.⁸ The increasing foreign debt accrued by Egypt resulted in strained relations with both Britain and France. Ultimately, in 1879 a diplomatic intervention resulted in Ismail’s ouster in favor of his son Tewfik Pasha.

As mentioned, the two defining characteristics that garnered Ismail his reputation (for better or for worse), was his participation with Britain in the abolition of the slave trade in

⁴ Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men*, 302-305.

⁵ Gideon Biger, “The First Map of Modern Egypt Mohammed Ali’s Firman and the Map of 1841,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 14, no. 3 (October 1978): 323-325

⁶ John Eliot Bowen, *The Conflict of East and West in Egypt*, (New York & London: Putnam, 1887): 28-29.

⁷ "Ismail Pasha." In *World Encyclopedia*. : Philip's, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199546091.001.0001/acref-9780199546091-e-5894>.

⁸ 2013. "Ismail Pasha." *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 6Th Edition 1. MasterFILE Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed February 1, 2014).

Equatorial Africa and his profligate spending. For the former, Ismail gained accolades across Britain and Europe for personally spending time, money, and resources to eliminate the scourge of slavery. For the latter, the increasing debt of the Egyptian state under his tenure would result in his downfall. Given these two extremes, commentators ascribed their own opinions towards Ismail within the larger context of orientalism. This does not mean they were consciously spouting orientalist themes for the sake of it. Rather, commentators utilized implicit truths when judging Ismail Pasha's leadership and rule. They drew onto the rich corpus of Western history towards non-Western societies to inform their judgments.

Ismail's commitment to ending the slave trade was the one endeavor that earned Ismail plaudits from even his staunchest critics. Whereas his predecessor Muhammad Ali Pasha had conquered the territories of modern Sudan for the profit inherent in the slave trade in the 1820s, the expeditions undertaken in the name of Egypt and the Khedive were not done to profit from slavery, but to end it. Much was said by Samuel W. Baker, a famed British explorer. On 8 December 1873, Baker spoke at a Royal Geographical Society meeting in London to recount his role in leading the Khedive's expedition into Central Africa. Before beginning his narrative, Baker states the purposes of the expedition to his British audience. While Baker does believe that the primary intention of Ismail was to found a "great [e]mpire in Central Africa," Baker nonetheless believes that the aim of the expedition (and subsequent annexation) of Central Africa was not done only for the sake of territorial expansion. Instead, the purpose of annexation was but a "first step" to end the slave trade once and for all in Central Africa. In Baker's own words, this mission was in line with "the great aim of England, freedom and liberty for every human being."⁹

⁹ S.W Baker, "The Khedive of Egypt's Expedition to Central Africa," *Proceeding of the Royal Geographical Society* 18, no. 1 (1873-1874): 52.

The positive treatment of Ismail as given by Baker is not entirely exceptional but for the fact that Baker marks Ismail as singular and unique with his “enlightened” views.¹⁰ Baker terms the idea of abolition as a “progressive principle” that was unfortunately uncommon among Egyptians, and only to be found among three individuals in Egypt, Ismail and his two advisors. In contrast, Baker recounts a tale of intrigue and treachery that was inherent in being a Christian leading “three Mohammedan regiments” to end slavery, “the most cherished of Mohammedan institutions.¹¹” Thus, Ismail is unique in being outside the supposed Muslim norm and instead is an avid proponent of English/Christian/Western presumptions. Baker was not alone in sharing this sentiment. At that same meeting of the Royal Geographic Society, the Prince of Wales (the future King Edward VII) both applauded the exploits of Baker and gave his opinions of the Khedive Ismail Pasha. The Prince lamented that the Khedive may simply be too ahead of his time for “his country,” but did remark upon the sincerity of the Khedive’s motives to expand into Equatorial Africa.¹²

This pair of speeches highlights an all too common assumption among many educated Britons. The notion of progressive liberty versus that of despotic slavery is a recurring motif in orientalism. Here, the connection made by the Prince of Wales is remarked to consist of a Christianity and Islam fundamentally at odds with one another. In the example of slavery, Ismail is defined as being outside the norm of other oriental rulers, including his grandfather Muhammad Ali.¹³ His stance to support for abolition and to assist in the elimination of the slave trade are admired not simply because of the merits inherent within those causes. Instead, the admiration derives from Ismail bucking the orientalist presumptions about the East and of Islam.

¹⁰ Baker, “Expedition to Central Africa,” 52.

¹¹ Baker, “Expedition to Central Africa,” 52.

¹² Baker, “Expedition to Central Africa,” 68.

¹³ Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, *Egypt in the Reign of Muhammad Ali*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 205.

In his support for abolition, these orientalist tropes do not apply to him. Nonetheless, he is very much defined by them because he is nonetheless judge to exist within a society where slavery is natural, if abhorrent.

Where Ismail does fall into the trope of an oriental despot is with his spendthrift conduct. Criticism of lavish spending and corruption for any ruler at any point of history is not a novel concept. However, when such criticisms were with regards to non-European rulers, any sign of profligacy was par for the course given the belief of oriental lavishness. This motif of the lavish oriental court was combined with the idea of the despotism, the notion where a ruler held absolute and tyrannical control over his fiefdom. Not surprising, criticisms of Ismail Pasha's fiscal policies were often combined with his own eccentricities to create a portrait of a power hungry man who abused his power to perpetuate his avarice and wantonness.

Such examples can be found in the correspondences of British travellers in Egypt. Lady Lucie Duff Gordon, travelling throughout Egypt and the Cape Coast in the 1860s, recounts in a 21 May 1863 letter to a certain "Mrs. Austin" on the state of affairs of Cairo five months into the rule of Ismail. Lady Duff Gordon recounts how Cairenes beseeched the annexation of Egypt by Queen Victoria due to the economic travails affecting Egypt. In contrast, Khedive Ismail was allowed by the Ottoman Sultan to "take 90,000 fedans of uncultivated land for himself as private property."¹⁴ If this was not bad enough, Ismail was also accused of undoing the pragmatic vision of Said Pasha by sabotaging Said's scheme to make many of his *employés* into honest landowners. Instead, Ismail swaps the cultivated land of these landowners for his own uncultivated lands¹⁵. In another letter, dated 20 August 1866, Duff Gordon recounts the situation in Luxor, with the peasantry fleeing the land due to expensive taxes. Local notables are forced to

¹⁴ Lucie Duff Gordon, *Letters from Egypt*, (Project Gutenberg, 2006. <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/17816>): 63.

¹⁵ Duff Gordon, "Letters from Egypt," 93.

present many gifts for Ismail when the Khedive made his way to nearby Minieh.¹⁶ If Lady Duff-Gordon's accounts are to be taken at face value, the Khedive is a man who desires wealth regardless for the wellbeing of his subjects or his state. Nonetheless, Duff-Gordon does not explicitly engage in orientalist rhetoric regarding the Khedive. This implicit tact is different with the overt orientalism of Britain's first Consul-General of Egypt.

One of the most virulent critics of Ismail Pasha and his lavish spending was of Evelyn Baring, first earl of Cromer.¹⁷ Lord Cromer, steeped in a classical education, rose through the ranks of the British administrative ranks (through both the War Office and Finance Office) to become the Comptroller-General of Egypt (1878-79) and later the Consul-General of Egypt (1883-1907).¹⁸ As noted by J.G. Darwin, Cromer's experiences in India resulted a marked change from his early reformist enthusiasm to a "world-weary cynicism about the capacity of 'Eastern peoples' to attain the moral and intellectual qualities needed for self-government."¹⁹ Such attitudes can be seen in his retrospective of his time in Egypt:

Those who have been in the East and have tried to mingle with the native population know well how utterly impossible it is for the European to look at the world with the same eyes as the Oriental...No casual visitor can hope to obtain much real insight into the true state of native opinion...[the Oriental's] tendency to agree with any one to whom they may be talking; the want of mental symmetry and precision, which is the chief distinguishing feature between the illogical and picturesque East and the logical West, and which tends such peculiar interest to the study of Eastern life and politics.²⁰

Cromer brought this attitude with him to Egypt when he became Controller-General, and the attitude he would dispense onto his examination of Ismail's rule, specifically the Khedive's

¹⁶ Duff Gordon, "Letters from Egypt," 391- 392.

¹⁷ Referred to here on out as Lord Cromer.

¹⁸ "Baring, Evelyn, first earl of Cromer (1841–1917)," J. G. Darwin in Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, January 2008, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30583> (accessed December 3, 2012).

¹⁹ "Baring, Evelyn, first earl of Cromer (1841–1917)," J. G. Darwin in Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, January 2008, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30583> (accessed December 3, 2012).

²⁰ Evelyn Baring Cromer (Earl of), *Modern Egypt*, Vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1908): 57-58.

spending habits. Of course, Cromer does not believe this to be a simple character flaw found with Ismail alone. Rather, Cromer connects Ismail's reputation with the wider motif of oriental despotism. For Cromer, the introduction of the European credit system of banking is inherently detrimental to the run-of-the-mill oriental ruler, naturally unfamiliar with such system. The prototypical oriental ruler can take out large loans, fulfilling any personal whim or undertaking the most incoherent of projects.²¹

In an essay discussing the case of Qing China, Lord Cromer touches upon the finances of the Chinese state. Despite writing in May 1913, the example of Ismail is not far from mind. In explaining to the readers the difficulties inherent with the foreign administration of finances for "Eastern countries," Cromer comments that the discrepancy in tax revenue collection from taxpayers to the local administration is highly reminiscent of "the Egyptian fiscal system under the régime [sic] of Ismail Pasha."²² Within a vacuum, this statement alone can be seen as a comparative example of Cromer's own experiences projected onto that of another state. Such comparisons are common even today. However, that Cromer infers that both Egypt and China are "Eastern" countries adds another, orientalist, perspective in his analysis, one that casts oriental societies as woefully behind those of the West.

Despite this, Cromer's views were not unchallenged. In numerous articles and editorials in *The Times*, the assertion is made that Ismail was not as bad as Cromer makes him out to be. In an 1882 article, Charles G. Gordon recounts how Europeans, far from chastising the Khedive's profligacy, instead felt that his reputation was unfairly earned. Indeed, Gordon compares the Egyptian financial situation under Ismail far more favorably than that found in "Turkey, Greece,

²¹ Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, 146-147.

²² Evelyn Baring Cromer (Earl of), *Political Essays*, (London: Macmillan and Co, 1913. <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/api/volumes/oclc/2534845.html>): 192.

[and] Spain.²³” Indeed, had Ismail only followed the prudent advice of the Egyptian Prime Minister, Sherif Pasha, Gordon believes that Ismail would still very well maintain his throne.²⁴ Comments like that of Gordon demonstrate that the existence of orientalist rhetoric in the analysis of Egypt does not equal to a monolithic, bigoted portrayal of all Eastern peoples by all Westerners. Gordon’s comments demonstrate that a diversity of opinions did exist, even among a person of Gordon’s stature.²⁵ Nonetheless, such voices do not mean orientalism, as a phenomenon, was non-existent.

The end of June 1879 saw the end of Ismail Pasha as Khedive. In the face of international pressure, spearheaded by Britain and France, Ismail Pasha abdicated in favor of Tewfik Pasha, Ismail’s eldest son.²⁶ The situation brought the introduction of a new Khedive who was seen as more “amiable” than his father, and with a better economic acumen. Despite this, an article appearing in the 3 January 1882 edition of *The Times* showed that while Tewfik Pasha was the new Khedive, that orientalist motifs were not at all expunged:

The Khedive, in his speech at the opening of Parliament to-day [sic] said that the burdens of the country have been lightened as much as possible, thanks to the aid of friendly foreign Powers [sic]. A country struggling toward civilisation [sic] is bound to pay its debt, and his highness was right to speak as he did; but Europe must acknowledge that the sentiment must have been hard to digest.²⁷

While *The Times* is addressing that the repayment of Egyptian debt will be a burden upon the Egyptian people (a fact that Europe needs to grapple with), the implications are clear. Egypt is not yet civilized. The Khedive is ruling over an uncivilized state, and his actions will determine if Egypt ever becomes civilized.

²³ Gordon Pasha, “Affairs in Egypt since the deposition of Ismail Pasha,” *The Times*, January 6, 1882.

²⁴ Gordon, “Affairs in Egypt,” *The Times*, January 6, 1882.

²⁵ Gordon Pasha, aka Charles G. Gordon, is the famed “Gordon of Khartoum” who would die fighting the Mahdist Revolt in Sudan in 1885.

²⁶ 2013. "Ismail Pasha." Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6Th Edition 1. MasterFILE Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed February 1, 2014).

²⁷ “The Egyptian Budget,” *The Times*, January 3, 1882.

What the example of Ismail Pasha and Orientalism provides is a microcosm of Western thought regarding the East. Encounters between Westerners and Easterners did not occur with a blank slate, but occurred within the context of preexisting biases and assumptions. From the Bible, to medieval European animus towards Islam, to the rise of scientific racism, and the industrialization of Europe – many factors contributed to rise of nineteenth century Orientalism. The East was compressed into simple tropes, and a given society's adherence (and lack thereof) simply confirmed the supposed truths of these tropes. This brief survey is not meant to salvage the reputation of Ismail Pasha, nor is it to dispute the historical narrative of his rule. Rather, the goal of this study has been to examine critically the language used to damn and praise him. More importantly, the reign of Ismail is significant as being the last autonomous ruler of Egypt until the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s. After the Anglo-French initiated coup d'état of 1879 and the suppression of the Urabi Revolt of 1882, Egypt, for all intents and purposes, became a de facto part of the British Empire. The language of orientalism, with its implicit belief of Eastern inferiority regarding Western democratic governance, was used to justify the continued disenfranchisement of not only Egyptians, but also millions of colonized peoples the world over. The messy, organic, and changing nature of orientalism abetted the rhetoric of imperialism and colonization. Whereas the fields of subaltern studies and American foreign policy has thus far dominated the discussion of Orientalism, the examination of Orientalist rhetoric regarding foreign leaders is a topic in need of further study. Hopefully this brief survey can serve as a starting point for future examinations of other leaders deposed under the aegis of imperialism.

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