

Lord Cromer in Egypt: Authoritarianism in Liberal Garb

Nick Lobo

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There are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power. That Balfour and Cromer ... could strip humanity down to such ruthless cultural and racial essences was not at all an indication of their particular viciousness. Rather it was an indication of how streamlined a general doctrine had become by the time they put it to use.¹

It is with these words that Edward Said described the mentality underlying the British occupation of Egypt, headed and personified by Consul-General Evelyn Baring, First Earl of Cromer, who served as the first Consul-General to Cairo. A gifted statesman espousing liberal values which he termed “sane imperialism,” Lord Cromer began his tenure as Britain’s chief representative in Egypt began in September 1883.² Although he never sought to prolong British presence in Egypt for occupation’s sake, he did view it as a necessity so as to restore order to the country and ensure Britain’s interests were defended.³ Despite the advances made in the early years of the occupation, both in the country’s economic situation as well as, in Cromer’s own view, its internal capacity for autonomy, he would steadfastly maintain that much more progress had yet to be made for Egypt to distance itself from “the orgy of corrupt and despotic misrule in which Isma‘il Pasha and his predecessors had indulged,” let alone become fit for self-governance and constitutionalism.⁴

Cromer approached the beginning of his reign with great tenacity and care, working toward fiscal solvency and structural reform and even taking time to occasionally meet with ordinary Egyptians. He simultaneously disparaged the epoch of corruption and malaise that accompanied the country’s decades under the rule of Muḥammad ‘Ali Pasha’s dynasty which preceded his arrival. As time went on, however, his Orientalist view of the relationship between

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 36.

² Evelyn Baring, Earl of Cromer, *Modern Egypt* (London: Macmillan, 1911), 268.

³ Evelyn Baring, Earl of Cromer, *Abbas II* (London: Macmillan, 1915), x.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xiv.

his countrymen and, in his terminology, their “subject races,” became progressively clearer.⁵ In short, Cromer never considered Egypt capable of becoming a modern, advanced state by Western standards because its people were inherently inferior to Europeans and unable to sustain for themselves good governance. Crucially, these views contributed to the formulation of British policy in Egypt to the same extent as other factors traditionally considered the most central, including economic interests and geopolitical rivalries in Europe.

Before Egypt

Prior to his arrival in Egypt, Sir Evelyn Baring served as aide to his cousin Lord Northbrook, Viceroy of India, after deciding not to continue pursuing a career in the military. There, he quickly distinguished himself for his aptitude for administration, earning himself the nickname “the vice-Viceroy” during his time as aide. Cromer worked in Egypt briefly at the end of the 1870s in the Debt Administration but returned to India in 1880, shortly before the ‘Urabi revolt broke out.⁶ Cromer’s true entrance to Egypt would come a few years later as Britain’s presence in the country began to solidify. At its outset, the occupation was viewed as a grim necessity in London’s eyes, ostensibly to be aimed at preserving “public tranquility” and renewing the authority of the Khedive. Indeed, Cromer sought to begin the withdrawal of British troops from Egypt at the soonest possible moment and would order the reduction in size of the garrison to 3,000 men upon his arrival.⁷

However, there was more to the question of Egypt than simply empowering Khedive Tawfiq and stamping out the remnants of the revolt; the “complete rehabilitation of the country,”

⁵ George Edward Kirk, *Lord Cromer of Egypt: A Retrospect*, (Cambridge, Mass: 1958), 409.

⁶ Kirk, 393.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 394.

in Cromer's own words, would not have been possible without the government's placement under British tutelage. Cromer and Lord Dufferin, a British consul to Istanbul at the time, both believed that Britain's imperative was to lay the groundwork for a long-term transition from despotism and disorder to liberalism and independence.⁸ However, in the statesmen's view, the East could not reliably be expected to handle the burdens of self-rule without an "indefinite" period of Western oversight in the reform process. Dufferin also considered Cromer's "masterful hand," proven during his service in India, the most suitable means by which to realize this objective; in the words of Khedive 'Abbas II, "[Cromer's] stay in India shaped his imperialistic principles and his authoritarianism... Egypt provided the stage where these proclivities could be expressed."⁹ Thus, in September 1883, when Consul-General Edward Malet was promoted, Her Majesty's Government appointed then-Sir Evelyn Baring his successor and Cromer arrived in Cairo to begin work.¹⁰

Tenure as Consul-General

Cromer and his contemporaries considered the arrival of the English to Egypt not an act of conquest, but one by which they could act as "a savior of society"; indeed, in order to save Egypt from itself, the Englishman could not simply give its leaders instruction, turn and make his departure; he would need to remain there and ensure that change took place. Cromer, as mentioned, had no interest in annexation, but he firmly believed that Britain's judicious hand in the reworking of an "unworkable" political system "would do as much good to the country as if

⁸ Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, 265-6.

⁹ Abbas, Khedive of Egypt and Amira El Azhari Sonbol, *The Last Khedive of Egypt: Memoirs of Abbas Hilmi II* (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 1998), 248.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 267.

[Britain] had annexed it.”¹¹ In Cromer’s view, a temporary, yet firmly-rooted occupation—albeit without a clear endpoint—represented the only way by which Egypt could be rehabilitated; a lighter touch would not suffice the country’s needs.

Moreover, the political savvy with which his countrymen were endowed sprung not from the particular brilliance of the British foreign service or Her Majesty’s Government, but rather from the innate acuity of their race in comparison to that of the conquered in logical matters. The Oriental, thus, could never match this level of poise, regardless of the advancement of his government or the depth of his education, because he is fundamentally disposed to “want of accuracy, which easily degenerates into untruthfulness.”¹² Cromer granted that the ancient Arabs had reached a notable degree of scientific and logical advancement, but that somewhere throughout the years their descendants lost their way.¹³ He also pointed to the manifold faults of Islam as a basis for social interaction and on each matter was quick to explain how Christianity provides a more sensible and logical worldview. The nature of Cromer’s relationship with his environment, as embodied in language, is telling; he never bothered to learn Arabic, the language of the common Egyptian, despite holding a degree of proficiency in Turkish, the language of the Ottoman administrator.¹⁴ In sum, Cromer was able to justify his decidedly illiberal, paternalistic, and imperial rule over Egypt on the basis of the intellectual inferiority of Egyptians, Arabs, or simply “Orientals” in general. Accordingly, he held his subjects in a low regard, convinced they as a group were incapable of logical reasoning.

Cromer also reflected extensively on the subject of corruption, which he considered ubiquitous and endemic to Egypt to a degree not paralleled elsewhere in the world, especially

¹¹ *Modern Egypt*, 557.

¹² *Ibid.*, 572.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 573-4.

¹⁴ Kirk, 398.

during the reign of Ismail Pasha.¹⁵ He detested the pervasiveness of the *bakhshish* in many aspects of daily life and worked extensively at the beginning of his reign to target the matter by way of his administrative reforms.¹⁶ Cromer's abolition of most aspects of the *corvée*, regulation of salary payment to government employees, reforms of the judiciary, and the placement of British officials in various bureaucratic positions served to reinforce the notion that without structural changes imposed from above by Europe, Egypt would be incapable of escaping its regrettable situation. Of these reforms, replacing Egyptians in high posts in the state bureaucracy with Englishmen was the most important to Cromer, as it was based on the notion that these white Britons were nearly "unimpeachable" in their integrity and Egyptians would rarely try to bribe them.¹⁷

Cromer understood corruption, along with general ineptitude, as an innate characteristic of the Egyptian; this indeed coincided with his regard of the "Oriental" more broadly, whose very nature was, as Said puts it, a "Platonic essence" defined in black-and-white contrast against that of the European.¹⁸ This point is further reinforced in the language Cromer used in his 1902 annual report, almost two decades into his tenure. Not only was the occupation, under his guidance, intended to rectify the immediate problems posed by the country's fiscal insolvency and administrative dysfunction—a goal which had been met well before the turn of the century—but it also sought to impart upon Egypt "all the main features of Western civilization" by means of improved healthcare and education, irrigation, and a legal system resembling that of Britain.¹⁹

¹⁵ Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, 789.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 791.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 792.

¹⁸ Said, 38.

¹⁹ "Lord Cromer's Annual Report on Egypt," *The Lancet* 159, no. 4105 (1902): 1272.

As Consul-General, Cromer was most successful in the first decade of his tenure. Following the chaos of the ‘Urabi revolution, the government of Egypt ran more expeditiously and efficiently than before. Cromer ensured that debt payment occurred smoothly and worked to end the country’s insolvency, gradually rebuilding the state’s monetary reserves and, according to Khedive ‘Abbas II, recreating “Egypt’s financial prestige.”²⁰ He then undertook a major irrigation project that culminated in the construction of the Aswan Dam, which vastly increased the available arable land in the country.²¹ Cromer recounted that the success of this project extended beyond its vast economic benefits—namely that it would “[ensure] the solvency of the Egyptian Treasury” despite its hefty price tag up front. The dam project also served to shore up Egyptian popular support for the occupation; Cromer concluded that while *fellahin* may not have been able to understand the minutiae of more technical, bureaucratic reforms, at least the importance of water would make sense to them. Irrigation reform, Cromer argued, “justified Western methods to Eastern minds” that were, in his view, unable to grasp the manifold benefits bestowed unto them by their European caretakers save for those which could be understood in the most basic material terms.²² Even Cromer would not have argued that the dam project singlehandedly eliminated any native opposition to the occupation, but the paternalistic notion that Egyptians would gladly accept the shackles of imperialism if only they employed logic as Westerners do is not lost on his reasoning here.

²⁰ Abbas and El Azhari Sonbol, 250.

²¹ Kirk, 399.

²² Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, 824-5.

Relations with the khedivate

Prior to ‘Abbas Ḥilmi II’s accession to the throne in January 1883, just weeks after the prince reached the age of eighteen, Cromer regarded his intercourse with the Egyptian government as relatively unproblematic, describing Tawfiq as a “law-abiding” if entirely unremarkable leader and the relationship between Khedive and Consul-General as one of “good understanding.”²³ Conversely, Cromer was informed before ‘Abbas’s succession that the khedive-to-be had the reputation of a troublemaker at the Austrian college at which he studied, portending the beginning of a rockier relationship to come. Indeed, it would come to pass that ‘Abbas displayed marked contempt for the occupation and showed little respect for his father’s practices, often placing himself in direct conflict with Britain.²⁴

Cromer described the khedive as outwardly patriotic but in a somewhat insincere way, in that ‘Abbas was primarily interested in personal advancement and accumulating wealth.²⁵ Nevertheless, in giving his support to nationalist movements and reciprocally receiving the “unreserved affection” of the people, in ‘Abbas’s own words, the khedive soon became the target of Cromer’s ire.²⁶ In his memoirs, ‘Abbas recounted that Cromer would often threaten him by saying the ‘Urabi revolt might return at any moment, that the dynasty needed British protection to ensure its survival, and that they could depose him at a moment’s notice with merely “a boat and a single sailor” if it became necessary.²⁷ Cromer considered ‘Abbas’s “extreme Anglophobia” and willingness to make an enemy of Britain the monarch’s undoing: he regarded

²³ Cromer, *Abbas II*, 12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 9-11.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁶ Abbas and El Azhari Sonbol, 252.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 250.

His Majesty's Government's later decision to remove 'Abbas an "act of political justice ... in the best interests of the Egyptian people."²⁸

'Abbas noted that a potential source of this enmity was that much of Cromer's cadre of advisors were foreigners, often Syrians, who would provide him with the sort of counsel he wanted to hear and that always aligned closely with his interests: in short, he rarely consulted with Egyptians. Further, Cromer was often unaware of "the consequences of such an imperialistic policy" which he promoted, embodied most clearly by the 1906 Dinshawai incident and resulting directly from his leadership position in India and his military training—a trait his diplomatically-trained successor, Sir Eldon Gorst, displayed to a lesser degree.²⁹ 'Abbas traced a sharp increase in Cromer's severity as the earl entered the later years of his life, manifesting in his treating the khedive with even greater malice than before. Even though 'Abbas, a European-educated member of the country's elite, was less a target of Cromer's Orientalist views on Egyptians than his largely-uneducated subjects were, it is clear that Cromer considered him unable to govern in the best interests of his people without the strong, often heavy-handed guidance of Britain.

Conclusion

Evelyn Baring's tenure as Consul-General to Egypt was marked and shaped by the low regard in which he held its people. Though Cromer did not seek a protracted British presence in the country, and in spite of his purportedly liberal political ideals, he came to view occupation as a necessary step if Egypt were to join the procession of modernity. The Egyptians, as far as he was concerned, were an intransigent, backwards lot incapable of both grasping the great service

²⁸ Cromer, *Abbas II*, vii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 252-4.

Britain was performing for them and of governing themselves without the supervision of Europe. Because Egyptians were the primary obstacle to reforming the country, there came no clear moment in Cromer's mind wherein British oversight of the country ceased to be necessary and independence could be given to them. This analysis has aimed to shed light on internal dynamics, inter alia the Orientalist views held by Cromer and his ilk, that drove British colonial efforts in Egypt in order to demonstrate the ways in which racist, stereotyped conceptions of the Oriental Egyptian contributed in the shaping of Crown policy in the region.

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