

THE CONFLICT OF EAST AND WEST IN EGYPT

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649177288

The conflict of East and West in Egypt by John Eliot Bowen

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JOHN ELIOT BOWEN

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IN
EGYPT

BY

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UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

NEW YORK & LONDON
G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
The Knickerbocker Press
1887

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1887

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ADDRESS

Press of
G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
New York

This work is inscribed to the Faculty of the School of Political Science, Columbia College, to whom it was presented, in its original form, as a "dissertation in part fulfillment of the conditions necessary for the attainment of the degree of doctor of philosophy."

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THE CONFLICT OF EAST AND WEST IN EGYPT.

I.

FROM MEHEMET ALI TO ISMAIL.

IT was not until the purchase of the Suez canal shares by Great Britain, in 1875, that the conflict to be described was waged with spirit. The influences and interests of the East and West, however, had clashed for many years. Long before the dawn of the nineteenth century the attention of England had been directed through Egypt to the far away Indian empire, that *El Dorado* that lured the British merchant-men to brave the storms of the southern seas. But the voyage around the Cape was a hazardous one and a long one; and the growth of commerce demanded that the Eastern empire should be made more accessible. England knew, and the world knew, that the direct route to India lay through the land of the ancient Pharaohs. England thought the way through Egypt should be overland; but France thought it

should be by a canal that would one day connect the Mediterranean and the Red Seas.

France was interested in the valley of the Nile. She had put her foot there before England. The great Napoleon knew the value of Egypt. "By seizing and holding Egypt," he said, "I retain and command the destinies of the civilized world." And so, in 1798, he seized Egypt; but he did not hold it. The English, under Abercrombie, compelled the French to retire by the battle of Alexandria, in 1801. And now, for a short time, the influence of England was felt in Egypt. But it did not last long; for, after the accession of Mehemet Ali in 1805, Egypt was able to stand by herself. This event marks the starting-point from which it will be necessary to trace in brief the history and development of Egypt, in order to appreciate the government and condition of the country a decade ago, when England purchased the canal shares.

When the firman of the Sublime Porte made Mehemet Ali the governor of Egypt, in 1805, the country was in a state of feudalism. The pasha appointed by the Porte had been only the nominal ruler, the real government of the country being in the hands of the petty lords, or beys, known as the *memlüks*. They had deference neither for pasha nor for sultan. It is true that a small tribute was promised the Porte every time a new pasha was appointed;

but it was almost never paid. The governors had been many since the beginning of the century. "Indeed," says Mr. Patton, in his history of the Egyptian Revolution, "all the pashas that intervene between the French rule and that of Mehemet Ali are a will-o'-the-wisp to the historian. A pasha of some sort flies before the eyes, but when we attempt to grasp him he is gone. . . . Thus successively rose and fell Mehemet Khûsuf Pasha, Tahir Pasha, Ali Pasha Gezairli, and Khurshid Pasha. Mehemet Ali alone stands out the distinct historical figure in the foreground."¹

The obscure Albanian owed his elevation to the pashalic to his success, while a Turkish commander, in quelling the dissensions among the memlûk beys. Once at the head of the government, he set to work in earnest to deprive them of their power, knowing full well that his position as the sultan's pasha would be at best both insignificant and insecure, so long as these feudal lords played fast and loose with the resources of the land. Until 1811, therefore, Mehemet Ali devoted himself to the suppression of the memlûks. Against this grasping for power England entered a feeble protest; not indeed because she sympathized with Egyptian feudalism, but because she happened, at that time,

¹ A. A. Patton, F.R.G.S., *A History of Egyptian Revolution to the Death of Mehemet Ali*, vol. ii., p. 14.