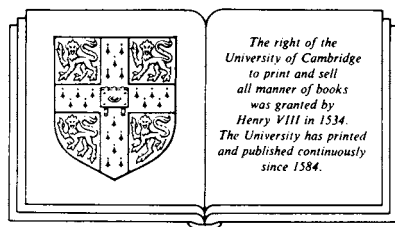


CAIRO UNIVERSITY AND THE MAKING OF MODERN EGYPT

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
CAMBRIDGE
NEW YORK PORT CHESTER MELBOURNE SYDNEY

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1990

First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Reid, Donald M. (Donald Malcolm). 1940–
Cairo University and the making of modern Egypt / Donald Malcolm
Reid.

p. cm. – (Cambridge Middle East library: 23)

Bibliography: p.

ISBN 0 521 36641 0

1. Jāmi'at al-Qāhirah – History. I. Title. II. Series

LG511.C48R45 1990

378.62'16–dc20 89-7047 CIP

ISBN 0 521 36641 0 hardback

ISBN 0 521 89433 6 paperback

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Introduction

Late in December 1950, Fuad I University celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in lavish style. Soon to be renamed Cairo University by the Free Officers who swept away the monarchy, it had begun as the private Egyptian University in 1908 with Prince Ahmad Fuad as its first rector. In 1925 Fuad as king had the satisfaction of refounding the Egyptian University as a full-fledged state institution; after his death it was renamed in his honor.¹

Palace officials intended the 1950 ceremonies to present thirty-year-old King Faruq as the worthy heir of his father Fuad and his grandfather Khedive Ismail, the respective founders of the university and of the Royal Geographical Society, which was simultaneously celebrating its seventy-fifth anniversary. Everyone knew that this image of King Faruq was contrived. Ismail and Fuad, for all their shortcomings, were able and dignified men; Faruq was a playboy and a national embarrassment.

For unknown reasons, one founding father of the university, Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid, was not in evidence at the jubilee. It seems unlikely that even King Faruq's desire for the limelight could have pushed this mentor of a generation of secular liberal nationalists offstage. Lutfi was a disciple of reformist shaykh Muhammad Abduh and had come to national prominence as editor of the newspaper *al-Farida* before World War I. As rector of the Egyptian University between the wars, he had struggled valiantly to maintain its autonomy in the face of pressures from the autocratic king, the British, religious conservatives from al-Azhar, and various political parties.

After the king, Minister of Education Taha Husayn held pride of place at the jubilee. Except for Lutfi al-Sayyid no one deserved the honor more. Taha's life had intertwined with the university for over forty years. Frustrated with his unimaginative courses at al-Azhar, the blind youth began attending the Egyptian University the day it opened in 1908. He also frequented *al-Farida*'s offices and became a protégé of Lutfi. The university sent Taha on to France for higher studies and hired him as a professor upon his return. Muslim purists from al-Azhar tried to force him out for his supposedly heretical views, but he moved up to become the first Egyptian

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dean of Arts in 1930. Taha's famous confrontation with King Fuad and Ismail Sidqi's palace-dominated government became a test of the university's ability to resist royal and religious interference in its affairs. Not surprisingly, Fuad's son Faruq did not welcome Taha into the last Wafdist cabinet in 1950. At the swearing-in the king reportedly snarled, "Husayn! I didn't want you, and I'm only taking you on probation. So watch your step!"² As minister Taha pushed through free secondary education, a step that contributed powerfully to the transformation of Cairo University from an elite into a mass university in the Nasser years.

Like his battle-scarred prime minister Nahhas, Taha Husayn had learned only too well by 1950 the cost of crossing a king. Taha went out of his way in his jubilee speech to praise King Fuad for appreciating that "knowledge must be above nationalities and national loyalties, and that knowledge knows no fatherland."³

Fuad, Taha continued, had not hesitated to invite French, British, Italian, and German professors to the university. He singled out orientalist Enno Littmann and Carlo Nallino for particular praise. The aged Littmann was in the audience, as was the late Nallino's daughter. Only four of a score of honorary doctorates awarded at the ceremony went to Muslims (academic dignitaries from Istanbul, Tunis, Baghdad, and Lahore); the rest went to Western academics. The latter included Littmann and the French orientalist Louis Massignon. Other orientalist were among the distinguished guests: H. A. R. Gibb, A. Guillaume, A. J. Arberry.⁴

Taha ignored the fact that some nationalists had opposed the large European presence in the university at a time when Egypt was struggling for independence. Within a year of the jubilee, Anglo-Egyptian tensions would drive the dwindling number of British professors from their posts, and Frenchmen would follow five years later.

By the time the weary celebrants assembled for Taha Husayn's farewell address on January 3, 1951, they had attended a palace reception and dined at the Mena House. They had paid their respects at the tombs of Ismail and Fuad and visited the university, the Geographical Society, the National Library, and the new Desert Institute. They had seen the pyramids, the Egyptian Museum, the citadel, and the Museum of Arab Art. The jubilee was a success, but time would soon show it to have been a last hurrah for the old university of the European professors, King Fuad, Lutfi al-Sayyid, and Taha Husayn. President Nasser, although in some ways heir to Taha's populism, had different ideas about what a university should be.

This book studies the development of Cairo University in the context of modern Egyptian history, examining how the university influenced – and was affected by – cultural, political, and socio-economic changes over time.

The university's history falls naturally into four periods: (1) 1908–19, when it was a struggling private institution; (2) 1919–50, when it was transformed into a full-fledged university but also became mired in the stalemate which ruined the old regime; (3) 1950–67, when the Free Officers came to power and Nasser tried to subordinate the university to his authoritarian brand of Arab socialism; and (4) 1967–88, when the university regained some freedom while wrestling with Islamist challenges and the problems of mass education inherited from Nasser's day. A long-range perspective is not yet available on the fourth period, which is treated briefly and rather like an epilogue in chapter 12. These four periods closely resemble conventional political periodization of Egyptian history; fervent hopes and declarations to the contrary, Egyptian academic and political life were intimately intertwined.

Four overlapping but distinct themes run throughout the book, with some chapters concentrating primarily on one theme, and others taking up several. Two themes, or polarities, are primarily political: (1) Western imperialism (itself divided along competing national lines) versus various rival forces of internal nationalism and (2) university autonomy versus state control. A third theme is socio-economic but has political and cultural aspects as well: elitism versus egalitarianism, or restricted versus open education. A fourth theme is cultural: Western-influenced secular ideals versus religious ideals for the university and the society as a whole. The university was never monolithic, and its diverse components could at times foster change and at times shore up the status quo.

Student politics are an essential part, but not the main theme, of this book. This is a topic in itself, and others have treated it more fully.⁵

It used to be the fashion in intellectual history to study progressions of great thinkers or chains of ideas, without much attention to socio-economic, political, or wider cultural contexts. Institutional histories of universities still often take the administrator's point of view; sometimes they also celebrate individual leaders. At the opposite historiographical extreme, individuals disappear and intellectual history (along with the history of universities) becomes a mere epiphenomenon, or "superstructure," of economically-driven class conflict. This book follows a middle path. It takes into account ideas, individuals, and administrative structures on the one hand and socio-economic forces on the other, observing how the two interacted in a specific institutional context. The university context of Taha Husayn's thought has not been sufficiently stressed in previous studies, for example, and Lutfi al-Sayyid's quarter-century of leadership at the university has been virtually ignored in favor of his prolific *al-Jarida* period before World War I.

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Cairo University is by no means the only middle-range, institutional home of Egyptian ideas and ideologies deserving of study. Other such entities include political parties, parliamentary bodies, and the Free Officers' military clique (these three have received considerable attention), as well as other state universities and schools, research institutes, al-Azhar, the press, the salon, the coffee house, professions like law and medicine, labor unions, literary clubs, charitable and religious organizations, and government ministries.

Together with the pre-existing higher professional schools it absorbed, Cairo University has been crucial to much of the political and intellectual life of twentieth-century Egypt. Doctors and lawyers, engineers and scientists, novelists and philosophers, teachers and bankers, prime ministers and bureaucrats; all studied there. Until the other state universities emerged, only al-Azhar – and in retrospect, the Egyptian Military Academy – provided important alternative educational roads to national prominence. As the only state university from 1925 until 1942, and in some ways the leading university up to the present, it was the main model for younger universities. Students from Cairo University (or, in the case of 1919, from the higher schools which later joined it), were in the forefront of demonstrations in 1919, 1935, 1946, 1951, 1968 and 1972–73 which significantly affected the course of Egypt's history.

In France, with its prestigious *grandes écoles*, the University of Paris has not been nearly so vital for national life, nor has Harvard in the decentralized United States. In early nineteenth-century England, most creative scientific and literary life took place outside the universities, an Oxbridge education had not yet become *de rigueur* for upper-class sons, and businessmen cultivated their talents elsewhere. Oxford and Cambridge revived later in the century, but they were still far less important on the national scene than Cairo University has been in Egypt. Cairo University's centrality tapered off in the 1950s as new universities emerged, research institutes sprang up, and army officers seized political power. But it still remains a vital national institution.

Cairo University also became the prime indigenous model for state universities elsewhere in the Arab world. Other candidates all had crippling handicaps. The Syrian Protestant College in Beirut (later the American University of Beirut) and Robert College in Istanbul were older, but they were private, small, and run by American missionaries. Istanbul University, which the Ottomans founded in 1900 after two false starts, lost its influence outside Turkey when the Ottoman Empire collapsed during World War I. The University of Algiers (1909) was a *colon* (European settler) institution. Cairo University held the field by default.

Egypt's experiment in borrowing Western educational techniques was nearly a century old when the Egyptian University opened. Early in the nineteenth century Muhammad Ali in Cairo and Mahmud II in Istanbul, like Peter the Great before them, appropriated Western military, industrial, and educational techniques. They hoped to enhance their personal power, revitalize their realms, beat out regional rivals, and parry Western imperial thrusts.⁶

Practical soldier that he was, Muhammad Ali decided to by-pass al-Azhar rather than try to remold it to his purpose. The resulting bifurcation of education has been a problem ever since. The ancient religious university topped a loosely-organized network of village schools (*kuttabs*) which had for centuries transmitted literacy and Islamic religious learning. Though no longer as creative as in its heyday, al-Azhar still boasted scholars like Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti and Hasan al-Attar. But as the century wore on, ambitious and intelligent men increasingly deserted al-Azhar for better opportunities with state institutions. Tahtawi, Muhammad Abduh, Saad Zaghlul, and Taha Husayn all began at al-Azhar but then moved on.

Muhammad Ali drew on al-Azhar as the only source of literate students for the European-style professional schools he established to service his army. Cairo University's faculties of Medicine, Engineering, and Veterinary Science are direct descendants of Muhammad Ali's schools. Aside from Khedive Ismail himself, Rifaa al-Tahtawi and Ali Mubarak were the most famous products of the educational "missions" (Egyptian English usage is retained here) which Muhammad Ali dispatched to Europe for higher studies.

The opposition of the European powers and internal difficulties eventually thwarted Muhammad Ali's grandiose dream, but in the 1860s his grandson Ismail resumed expansion into Africa, opened the Suez Canal, improved the irrigation network, and expanded cotton exports to Europe. Ismail purchased semi-independence from Istanbul and laid the foundations for modern Cairo. His telegraph, railway, and postal systems and his improved ports linked Egypt closely to the European-dominated world market. With the help of his minister Ali Mubarak, Ismail revived the schools which had survived the vicissitudes of Abbas Hilmi I's and Said's reigns and founded many more. Primary and secondary schools finally received serious attention. Ismail's School of Administration is still in existence as Cairo University's Faculty of Law.

But the West was closing in. Ismail had run up impossible debts, and in 1879 Britain and France had him deposed. Colonel Ahmad Urabi's anti-Ottoman and anti-European army revolt precipitated the "temporary" British occupation which was to last over seventy years. In the 1890s Khedive Abbas Hilmi II and Mustafa Kamil, both mere youths, began

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searching for ways to resist an occupier against whom violence seemed futile. Shaykh Muhammad Abduh and his disciples preferred self-strengthening through educational and other gradual reforms while keeping independence as a distant goal. It was in this *de facto* colonial context that the Egyptian University came into being in 1908.

All around the globe in 1908 Western commerce, technology, military power, and administrative techniques seemed to be sweeping all before them. Only “Eastern” Japan’s victory over “European” Russia suggested the possibility of a different outcome. World War I, the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression, and World War II had not yet shaken Western civilization to its core. Was it any wonder that the founders of the Egyptian University looked Westward for their models? Conservative ulama (formally trained Muslim religious leaders) entrenched in al-Azhar considered Westernization part of the problem, not the means to a solution. They frowned on the new university and fought off intermittent attempts to reshape their own institution along Western lines. But for all the reverence it still commanded in town and country, al-Azhar no longer had the exclusive ear of Egypt’s political and intellectual elite.

Some Muslim reformers took comfort in the thought that in borrowing from Europe they were simply reclaiming their own heritage. Much Arabic-Islamic learning, after all, had passed over into Latin in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, stimulating the revival of European scholarship. George Maqdisi has argued that the European residential college itself, but not the university corporation, was an adaptation of the Islamic *madrasa*.⁷

The Western university which took shape during the thirteenth century in Italy, Spain, France, and England soon developed its own tradition of export. It spread to Germany, Bohemia, and Poland in the fourteenth century, and Scandinavia and Scotland in the fifteenth. In the sixteenth century it crossed the seas to Ireland, Mexico, and Peru. Seventeenth-century colonists set up English-style colleges in North America, and Russia acquired her first university, on the German model, in the eighteenth century. In 1857 British India founded universities in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. Two decades later, the Japanese began transforming several ancient schools into Western-style universities.⁸ Now it was Egypt’s turn.

Part 1 of this study examines the Egyptian University from its founding in 1908 – despite Lord Cromer’s opposition – to the national uprising of 1919. The archives of the private university, hitherto untapped by Western scholars, are particularly valuable here. Prince (later Sultan, then King) Ahmad Fuad, Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid, and Taha Husayn stand out in Part 1 both as forceful individuals who left their mark on the university and as

representatives, respectively, of the royal patron, the gentleman-scholar, and the student turned professional academic. Mustafa Kamil had a hand in the university project, as did Muhammad Abduh and his followers Saad Zaghlul and Qasim Amin. But the palace soon took over. Orientalists and other European professors did much of the lecturing at the tiny, struggling institution in its early years. The tribulations of would-be professors Jurji Zaydan and Mansur Fahmi made clear the danger of provoking religious conservatives by following Western styles of scholarship too closely.

Part 2 treats the 1919–50 era, during which King Fuad, Lutfi, Taha, and others firmly established the state university. While Britain and France battled for influence in its halls, Egyptian professors slowly replaced their European mentors. Women fought their way in; their pre-war effort had been aborted. The university began slowly broadening its elitist socio-economic base of recruitment. During the turbulent 1930s, Lutfi al-Sayyid and Taha Husayn confronted King Fuad on the issue of university autonomy, student protests flared up frequently, and professors opened a pathway into the cabinet elite. The university battled al-Azhar and the teacher-training college of Dar al-Ulum for the right to supply Arabic teachers for the state schools. Religious conservatives attacked the dissertation of Ahmad Khalaf Allah for its supposed transgressions on Islam.

Part 3 takes up the story after the 1950 jubilee. It examines liberal critiques of the university, the forced departure of British and French professors, and the arrival of American educational influence. The remainder of Part 3 discusses the transmutations of the Nasser era. In 1954, as part of his consolidation of national power, Nasser purged the university. Nasser was a populist, and he flung the university's doors open wide. Unfortunately educational expenditures did not keep pace, and quality fell off sharply. Nasser demanded practical, applied learning and immediate results. He welcomed professors of agronomy, economics, and engineering into his cabinets, but factional maneuvering, poor planning, and his own autocratic proclivities frustrated his technocratic dream.

Nasser tried to mobilize the university for his Arab nationalist and socialist agenda, but only a limited numbers of professors and students signed on with a regime which had silenced academic dissent. Cairo and the other universities introduced required courses on the July 23 (1952) Revolution, Arab Society, and Arab Socialism, but “uncommitted” and “reactionary” professors and unenthusiastic students undercut the program. Nasser also shook up al-Azhar, forcing it to add medical, engineering, and agriculture faculties and even to admit women.

Chapter 12 in Part 4 lightly sketches in the post-1967 story. Student demonstrations returned with a roar in February 1968, and Nasser and then Sadat had to loosen the reins on the university. President Sadat's “open

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door” (*infitah*) policy following the October 1973 war encouraged professors to join the massive temporary migration to oil-rich Arab countries. Sadat switched superpower patrons and made peace with Israel. As American aid and experts flooded in, Egyptian professors joined American-funded research projects but worried about the resultant cultural dependency. Conditions at the university went from bad to worse: professors were lured to Arabia, students crowded classrooms in unprecedented numbers, funds were critically short, and job prospects were dismal. Such conditions and the failure of Nasser’s secular panaceas opened the way for the Islamists of the “Islamic groups” (*jamaat islamiyya*), who shouldered aside leftist students in the 1970s with Sadat’s encouragement. Sadat lived to regret his policy. At the university and elsewhere, President Mubarak has tolerated Islamists who do not openly challenge his legitimacy, while coming down hard on those who do.⁹