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An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians

Edward William Lane (1801–76) published this work in two volumes in 1836. Resident in the country for many years, and fluent in Arabic, he devoted his life's study to Egypt. A fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and the Institut de France, Lane translated *One Thousand and One Nights* and selections from the Koran. His major work was an Arabic–English lexicon, a monumental undertaking; he was working on the sixth volume when he died. Volume 1 of *Modern Egyptians* offers detailed accounts of climate, housing, education and domestic life. It also looks at the country's systems of religion, law and government, and examines language, literature, sciences and magic. A bestseller in its own day, this well-illustrated work remains a key text for students of nineteenth-century Egypt and the Arab world.

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VOLUME 1

EDWARD WILLIAM LANE



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AN
ACCOUNT
OF THE
MANNERS AND CUSTOMS
OF THE
MODERN EGYPTIANS,

WRITTEN IN EGYPT DURING THE YEARS

1833,-34, AND-35,

PARTLY FROM NOTES MADE DURING A FORMER VISIT TO
THAT COUNTRY IN THE YEARS 1825,-26,-27 AND-28.

BY EDWARD WILLIAM LANE.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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P R E F A C E.

Cairo, 1835.

DURING a former visit to this country, undertaken chiefly for the purpose of studying the Arabic language in its most famous school, I devoted much of my attention to the manners and customs of the Arab inhabitants; and in an intercourse of two years and a half with this people, soon found that all the information which I had previously been able to obtain respecting them was insufficient to be of much use to the student of Arabic literature, or to satisfy the curiosity of the general reader. Hence I was induced to cover some quires of paper with notes on the most remarkable of their usages, partly for my own benefit, and partly in the hope that I might have it in my power to make some of my countrymen better acquainted with the domiciliated classes of one of the most interesting nations of the world, by drawing a detailed picture of the inhabitants of the largest Arab city. The period of my first visit to this country did not, however, suffice for the accom-

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plishment of this object, and for the prosecution of my other studies; and I relinquished the idea of publishing the notes which I had made on the modern inhabitants: but, five years after my return to England, those notes were shown to some members of the Committee of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, at whose suggestion, the Committee, interested with the subjects of them, and with the novelty of some of their contents, engaged me to complete and print them. Encouraged by their approbation, and relying upon their judgment, I immediately determined to follow their advice, and, by the earliest opportunity, again departed to Egypt. After another residence of more than a year in the metropolis of this country, and half a year in Upper Egypt, I have now accomplished, as well as I am able, the task proposed to me*.

It may be said, that the English reader already pos-

* It gives me much pleasure to find, that, while I have been attempting to preserve memorials of the manners and customs of the most polished modern Arab people, one of my learned friends (M. Fulgence Fresnel) has been occupied, with eminent success, in rescuing from oblivion many interesting notices of the history of the *early* Arabs, and that another (Mr. Wilkinson) has been preparing to impart to us an account of the private life, manners &c., of the Ancient Egyptians.

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sesses an excellent and ample description of Arab manners and customs, in Dr. Russell's account of the people of Aleppo. I will not forfeit my own claim to the reputation of an honest writer, by attempting to detract from the just merits of that valuable and interesting work; but must assert, that it is, upon the whole, rather an account of *Turkish* than of *Arab* manners; and that neither the original Author, nor his brother to whom we are indebted for the enlarged and much improved edition, was sufficiently acquainted with the Arabic language to scrutinize some of the most interesting subjects of inquiry which the plan of the work required them to treat: nor would their well-known station in Aleppo, or perhaps their national feelings, allow them to assume those disguises which were necessary to enable them to become familiar with many of the most remarkable religious ceremonies, opinions, and superstitions, of the people whom they have described. Deficiencies in their remarks on these subjects are the only faults of any importance that I can discover in their excellent and learned work*.

* Among the memoirs in "the great French work" on Egypt is one entitled "Essai sur les mœurs des habitans modernes de l'Égypte;" but its author appears to me to have fallen into an error of considerable magnitude, in applying, to the Egyptians in

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I have been differently circumstanced. Previously to my first visit to this country, I acquired some knowledge of the language and literature of the Arabs; and general, observations which are, in truth, for the most part descriptive of the manners and customs of their naturalized rulers, the Memloo'ks. It is probable that the Egyptians in some degree imitated, when they were able to do so, the habits and customs of this class: I may, however, venture to affirm, that the essay here alluded to does not convey a true notion of their *present* moral and social state. Its author, moreover, shows himself to have been often extremely careless both in his observations and inquiries: this is particularly evident in his singular misstatement of the correspondence of French and Mohhammadan hours, and in the first two pages (in the 8vo. edition) of the section on public fêtes. He has given many just philosophical observations; but these occupy too large a proportion of a memoir scarcely exceeding one third of the extent of the present work. To show that these remarks are not made in an invidious spirit, I most willingly express my high admiration of other parts of "the great work" (especially the contributions of M. Jomard), relating to subjects which have alike employed my mind and pen, and upon which I shall probably publish my observations.—Burckhardt's "Arabic Proverbs" and their illustrations convey many notions of remarkable customs and traits of character of the modern Egyptians; but are very far from composing a complete exposition, or, in every case, a true one; for national proverbs are bad tests of the morality of a people.—There is one work, however, which presents most admirable pictures of the manners and customs of the Arabs, and particularly of those of the Egyptians: it is "the Thousand and One Nights," or Arabian Nights' Entertainments: if the English reader possessed a close translation of it with sufficient illustrative notes, I might almost have spared myself the labour of the present undertaking.

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in a year after my arrival here, I was able to converse, with the people among whom I was residing, with tolerable ease. I have associated, almost exclusively, with Moos'lims, of various ranks in society: I have lived as they live, conforming with their general habits; and, in order to make them familiar and unreserved towards me on every subject, have always avowed my agreement with them in opinion whenever my conscience would allow me, and in most other cases, refrained from the expression of my dissent, as well as from every action which might give them disgust; abstaining from eating food forbidden by their religion, and drinking wine, &c. ; and even from habits merely disagreeable to them; such as the use of knives and forks at meals. Having made myself acquainted with all their common religious ceremonies, I have been able to escape exciting, in strangers, any suspicion of my being a person who had no right to intrude among them, whenever it was necessary for me to witness any Mohhammadan rite or festival. While, from the dress which I have found most convenient to wear, I am generally mistaken, in public, for a Turk, my acquaintances, of course, know me to be an Englishman; but I constrain them to treat me as a Moos'lim, by my

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freely acknowledging the hand of Providence in the introduction and diffusion of the Mohhammadan religion, and, when interrogated, avowing my belief in the Messiah, in accordance with the *words* of the Ckoor-a'n, as the Word of God, infused into the womb of the Virgin Mary, and a spirit proceeding from Him. Thus, I believe, I have acquired their good opinion, and much of their confidence; though not to such an extent as to prevent my having to contend with many difficulties. The Moos'lims are very averse from giving information on subjects connected with their religion or superstitions to persons whom they suspect of differing from them in sentiments; but very ready to talk on such subjects with those whom they think acquainted with them: hence, I have generally obtained some slight knowledge, of matters difficult for me thoroughly to learn, from one of the most lax, and of the least instructed, of my friends; so as to be able to draw into conversation, upon the desired topics, persons of better information; and by this mode, I have invariably succeeded in overcoming their scruples. I have had two professors of Arabic and of Mohhammadan religion and law as my regular, salaried tutors; and, by submitting to them questions on any matters respecting which I

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was in doubt, have authenticated or corrected, and added to, the information derived from conversation with my other friends. Occasionally, also, I have applied to higher authorities; having the happiness to number among my friends in this city some persons of the highest attainments in Eastern learning.

Perhaps the reader may not be displeased if I here attempt to acquaint him more particularly with one of my Moos'lim friends, the first of those above alluded to; and to show, at the same time, the light in which he, like others of his country, regards me in my present situation.—The sheykh Ahh'mad (or *seyd* Ahh'mad; for he is one of the numerous class of *shereefs*, or descendants of the Prophet) is somewhat more than forty years of age, by his own confession; but appears more near to fifty. He is as remarkable in physiognomy as in character. His stature is under the middle size: his beard, reddish, and now becoming grey. For many years he has been nearly blind: one of his eyes is almost entirely closed; and both are ornamented, on particular occasions (at least on the two grand annual festivals), with a border of the black pigment called *kohhl*, which is seldom used but by women. He boasts his descent not only from the Prophet, but also, from

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a very celebrated saint, Esh-Shaara'wee *; and his complexion, which is very fair, supports his assertion, that his ancestors, for several generations, lived in the north-western parts of Africa. He obtains his subsistence from a slender patrimony, and by exercising the trade of a bookseller. Partly to profit in this occupation, and partly for the sake of society, or at least to enjoy some tobacco and coffee, he is a visitor in my house almost every evening.

For several years before he adopted the trade of a bookseller, which was that of his father, he pursued no other occupation than that of performing in the religious ceremonies called *zikrs*; which consist in the repetition of the name and attributes, &c., of God, by a number of persons, in chorus; and in such performances he is still often employed. He was then a member of the order of the Saadee'yeh durwee'shes, who are particularly famous for devouring live serpents; and he is said to have been one of the serpent-eaters: but he did not confine himself to food so easily digested. One night, during a meeting of a party of durwee'shes of his order, at which their sheykh was present, my friend became affected with religious frenzy,

* Thus commonly pronounced, for Esh-Shaara'nee.

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seized a tall glass shade which surrounded a candle placed on the floor, and ate a large portion of it. The sheykh and the other durwee'shes, looking at him with astonishment, upbraided him with having broken the institutes of his order; since the eating of glass was not among the miracles which they were allowed to perform; and they immediately expelled him. He then entered the order of the Ahhmedee'yeh; and as they, likewise, never ate glass, he determined not to do so again. However, soon after, at a meeting of some brethren of this order, when several Saadee'yeh also were present, he again was seized with frenzy, and, jumping up to a chandelier, caught hold of one of the small glass lamps attached to it, and devoured about half of it, swallowing also the oil and water which it contained. He was conducted before his Sheykh, to be tried for this offence; but, on his taking an oath never to eat glass again, he was neither punished nor expelled the order. Notwithstanding this oath, he soon again gratified his propensity to eat a glass lamp; and a brother durwee'sh, who was present, attempted to do the same; but a large fragment stuck between the tongue and palate of this rash person; and my friend had great trouble to extract it. He was again tried by his

Sheykh; and, being reproached for having broken his oath and vow of repentance, he coolly answered, "I repent again: repentance is good: for He whose name be exalted hath said, in the Excellent Book, 'Verily, God loveth the repentant.'" The Sheykh, in anger, exclaimed, "Dost thou dare to act in this manner, and then come and cite the Ckooor-a'n before me?"—and with this reproof, he ordered that he should be imprisoned ten days; after which, he made him again swear to abstain from eating glass; and on this condition he was allowed to remain a member of the Ahhmedee'yeh. This second oath, he professes not to have broken.—The person whose office it was to prosecute him related to me these facts; and my friend reluctantly confessed them to be true.

When I was first acquainted with the sheykh Ahh'-mad, he had long been content with one wife; but now he has indulged himself with a second*, who continues to live in her parents' house: yet he has taken care to assure me, that he is not rich enough to refuse my yearly present of a dress. On my visiting him for the second time during my present residence in this place,

* He professes to have had more than thirty wives in the course of his life; but, in saying so, I believe he greatly exaggerates.

his mother came to the door of the room in which I was sitting with him, to complain to me of his conduct in taking this new wife. Putting her hand within the door, to give greater effect to her words by proper action (or perhaps to show how beautifully the palm, and the tips of the fingers, glowed with the fresh red dye of the *hhen'na*), but concealing the rest of her person, she commenced a most energetic appeal to my sympathy.—“ O Efen'dee ! ” she exclaimed, “ I throw myself upon thy mercy ! I kiss thy feet ! I have no hope but in God and thee ! ” “ What words are these, my mistress ? ” said I : “ what misfortune has befallen thee ? and what can I do for thee ? Tell me. ” “ This son of mine, ” she continued, “ this my son Ahh'mad, is a worthless fellow : he has a wife here, a good creature, with whom he has lived happily, with God's blessing, for sixteen years ; and now he has neglected her and me, and given himself up to a second wife, a young, impudent wench : he lavishes his money upon this monkey, and others like her, and upon her father and mother and uncles and brother and brother's children, and I know not whom besides, and abridges us, that is, myself and his first wife, of the comforts to which we were before accustomed. By the Prophet ! and by thy

dear head! I speak truth. I kiss thy feet, and beg thee to insist upon his divorcing his new wife.”—The poor man looked a little foolish while his mother was thus addressing me from behind the door; and as soon as she was gone, promised to do what she desired. “But,” said he, “it is a difficult case. I was in the habit of sleeping occasionally in the house of the brother of the girl whom I have lately taken as my wife: he is a clerk in the employ of ‘Abba’s Ba’sha; and rather more than a year ago, ‘Abba’s Ba’sha sent for me, and said, ‘I hear that you are often sleeping in the house of my clerk Mohham’mad. Why do you act so? Do you not know that it is very improper, when there are women in the house?’ I said, ‘I am going to marry his sister.’ ‘Then why have you not married her already?’ asked the Ba’sha. ‘She is only nine years of age.’ ‘Is the marriage contract made?’ ‘No.’ ‘Why not?’ ‘I cannot afford, at present, to give the dowry.’ ‘What is the dowry to be?’ ‘Ninety piasters.’ ‘Here, then,’ said the Ba’sha, ‘take the money, and let the contract be concluded immediately.’ So you see I was obliged to marry the girl; and I am afraid that the Ba’sha will be angry if I divorce her: but I will act in such a manner that her brother shall

insist upon the divorce; and then, please God, I shall live in peace again.”—This is a good example of the comfort of having two wives.

A short time since, upon his offering me a copy of the Ckooor-a'n, for sale, he thought it necessary to make some excuse for his doing so. He remarked, that, by my conforming with many of the ceremonies of the Moos lims, I tacitly professed myself to be one of them; and that it was incumbent upon him to regard me in the most favourable light, which he was the more willing to do because he knew that I should incur the displeasure of my King by making an open profession of the Mohhammadan faith, and therefore could not do it*. “You give me,” said he, “the salutation of ‘Peace be on you!’ and it would be impious in me, being directly forbidden by my religion, to pronounce you an unbeliever; for God, whose name be exalted, hath said, ‘Say not unto him who greeteth thee with peace, Thou art not a believer †’: therefore,” he added,

* It is a common belief among the Egyptians, that every European traveller who visits their country is an emissary from his King; and it is difficult to convince them that this is not the case: so strange to them is the idea of a man's incurring great trouble and expense for the purpose of acquiring the knowledge of foreign countries and nations.

† Ckooor-a'n, chap. iv., ver. 96.

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“it is no sin in me to put into your hands the noble Ckoor-a’n: but there are some of your countrymen who will take it in unclean hands, and even sit upon it! I beg God’s forgiveness for talking of such a thing: far be it from you to do so: you, praise be to God, know and observe the command, ‘None shall touch it but those who are clean *’”.—He once sold a copy of the Ckoor-a’n, on my application, to a countryman of mine, who, being disturbed, just as the bargain was concluded, by some person entering the room, hastily put the sacred book upon the seat, and under a part of his dress, to conceal it. The bookseller was much scandalized by this action; thinking that my friend was sitting upon the book, and that he was doing so to show his contempt of it: he declares his belief that he has been heavily punished by God for this unlawful sale.—There was only one thing that I had much difficulty in persuading him to do during my former visit to this country; which was, to go with me, at a particular period, into the mosque of the Hhasaney’n, the reputed burial-place of the head of El-Hhosey’n, and the most sacred of the mosques in the Egyptian metropolis. On my passing with him before one of the entrances of this

* Ckoor-a’n, chap. lvi., ver. 78.

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building, one afternoon during the fast of Rum'ada'n, when it was crowded with Turks, and many of the principal people of the city were among the congregation, I thought it a good opportunity to see it to the greatest advantage, and asked my companion to go in with me. He positively refused, in the fear of my being discovered to be an Englishman, which might so rouse the fanatic anger of some of the Turks there as to expose me to some act of violence. I therefore entered alone. He remained at the door, following me with his eye only (or his only eye), and wondering at my audacity; but as soon as he saw me acquit myself in the usual manner, by walking round the bronze screen which surrounds the monument over the spot where the head of the martyr is said to be buried, and then putting myself into the regular postures of prayer, he came in, and said his prayers by my side.

After relating these anecdotes, I should mention, that the characters of my other acquaintances here are not marked by similar eccentricities. My attentions to my visitors have been generally confined to the common usages of Eastern hospitality; supplying them with pipes and coffee, and welcoming them to a share of my dinner or supper. Many of their communications I

have written in Arabic, at their dictation, and since translated, and inserted in the following pages. What I have principally aimed at, in this work, is correctness; and I do not scruple to assert, that I am not conscious of having endeavoured to render interesting any matter that I have related by the slightest sacrifice of truth.

Since writing the above, it has occurred to me, that I should offer some apology for the unusual mode in which I have written Arabic words in the following pages. Had I found it necessary only to insert a few of such words, already found in the works of many of my countrymen, I might have expressed them in the same manner as most of those authors have done; writing "Mahomet" or "Mohammed" for "*Mohham'mad*," "Koran" for "*Choor-a'n*," "Caliph" for "*Khaleefeh*," "Sultan" for "*Soolta'n*," "Dervise" for "*Durweesh*," "Bedouin" for "*Bed'awee*," "Divan" for "*Deewa'n*," "Harem" for "*Hhare'm*," &c.; but since I have been obliged to employ a great number of Arabic words, and many which I have never seen in European characters in any former work, I have thought it better to write all of them according to a particular system that appears

to me best calculated to enable an English reader to pronounce them with tolerable correctness*. According to this system,

a is pronounced as in our word *bad* :

a', generally as in *father* ; but sometimes its sound approaches to that of *a* in *ball* :

ck represents a guttural *k* : most of the people of the metropolis of Egypt, and those of some provinces, cannot pronounce it, and substitute for it a *hiatus* ; while in Upper Egypt, the sound of *g* in *give* is used in its stead :

e is pronounced as in *bed* :

e', as in *there* :

ee, as in *bee* :

ei, as our word *eye* :

ey, as in *they* :

g, generally as in *give* ; but in some parts of Egypt, as in *gem*, or nearly so :

gh represents a very guttural *g* ; the sound produced in gargling :

hh represents a strong aspirate, very different from our *h* :

* I should remark also, that I have written "*Ba'sha*" instead of "*Pash'a'*" in conformity with the pronunciation of the Egyptians.

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i is pronounced as in *bid* :

kh represents a guttural sound like that produced in expelling saliva from the throat : it approaches nearer to the sound which I express by *hh* than to that of *k* :

o is pronounced as in *obey* (short) :

o', as in *bone* :

oo, as in *book* :

oo', as in *boot* :

ow, as in *down* :

u, as in *but*.

An *apostrophe* denotes a guttural sound to which no letter of our alphabet approximates : it is like that which is heard in the bleating of sheep.

The usual sign of a *diæresis* is employed to show that a final *e* is not mute, but pronounced as that letter when unaccented in the beginning or middle of a word.

With regard to the engravings which accompany this work, I should mention, that they are from drawings which I have made, not to embellish the pages, but merely to explain the text.

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Edward William Lane

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