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1979

Mary Haddad Macron, Arab Americans and Their Communities of Cleveland

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Recommended Citation

Tayyara, Abed el-Rahman, "Mary Haddad Macron, Arab Americans and Their Communities of Cleveland" (1979). *World Languages, Literatures, and Cultures Faculty Publications*. 133.

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Mary Haddad Macron, *Arab Americans And Their Communities of Cleveland* (Cleveland, Cleveland State University Press, 1979). Pp. 266. Reviewed by Abed el-Rahman Tayyara

This monograph delineates the history and personal experiences of Arab communities in Cleveland and enhances our understanding of their role and contribution to the multifaceted American society and culture. Historically speaking, the book sheds light on the early stages of the Arab presence in Cleveland, particularly Syrians and Lebanese, which that can be traced back to the second half of the 19th century. The fact that almost nothing has been written about this topic makes this work an essential piece in the history of the diverse ethnic mosaic of Cleveland. Having served as the executive secretary of the Cleveland Council on Arab-American Relations, Mary Haddad-Macron was acquainted with major figures in the Arab community as well as having had access to important materials about the subject. Three major events seem to have informed the background against which this book was published: the Lebanese Civil War in Lebanon (1975-1990), the bicentennial celebration of the United States in 1976, and the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979.

Haddad-Macron follows chronological order in organizing this book which is divided into seven major parts each of which has a number of sub-chapters. The book is also abundant with illustrations, maps, and pictures of notables to give a vivid rendering of the early life of the Arab community in the city. The author dedicates a considerable portion of the book (the first four parts) to communicate to the readers the important place that Arabs occupy in ancient history that informs their cultural and historical identity. In the first part the author traces the Arabs' origins to the great ancient civilizations that emerged in the Middle East and contributed considerably to the development of human history. An emphasis is placed here on two geographical areas: Syria/Lebanon where the Phoenicians were active, and the Egypt, the land of the Pharaohs.

The second part of the book deals with the religious-ethnic genealogies of the Arabs by tracing them back to the father of monotheism -- Abraham. Haddad-Macron also places this discussion within a larger ethnic-linguistic framework by connecting it to the Semitic and Aramaic milieus. In addition, the author also dedicates two sections to objectively discuss the early history of Islam both as a religion and a culture aiming to achieve two important objectives. First, how Islamic conquests united, linguistically and culturally, diverse peoples and vast regions under Arabic; and, second, the similarity and closeness of Islamic teachings to those of other monotheistic religions. By doing so, the author tries to debunk certain misconceptions about Muslims and Arabs. Such is the case with the status of women and the issue of veiling that figure prominently in the presentations of Islam and the Arab culture in mainstream Western media. Hence, part three of the monograph deals exclusively with the impact that Muslims made in many scholarly areas on the West. Specifically, Haddad-Macron talks about their contributions in development of the mathematics, astronomy, medicine, architecture, navigation and geography, arts, sciences, literature, calligraphy, philosophy, and music. She also refers to the importance of the translation movements from other languages, such as Greek, into Arabic.

The fourth part of the book, which is entitled “The Arab World and the West in Conflict,” deals with two main historical junctures that influenced the history of the Arabs. Under the first section of this part, the author reflects on the history of the conflict between East (Arab-Islamic) and West (Christian) that she characterizes as a religious-cultural confrontation. The Crusades occupies an important place in this discussion because the author considers it as a turning point in history that imbued the relations between the sides with enmity, mistrust, and mutual prejudices. She even believes that “[t]he memories of long wars between them burned even into the twentieth century” (p. 74). The second section of this part is dedicated to major historical

events that the Arab world underwent between the 12th -20th centuries. The author rightly places an emphasis on the history of the Ottoman Empire that considerably shaped the modern history of the Arabs and the Middle East. Haddad-Macron describes Ottoman role as “years of suppression, of [sic] occupation, corrupt governments, and corrupt leader” (p. 85). The author concludes her historical background with a brief description of the history the Arab World under European colonization that also led to disastrous consequences.

After this long historical introduction the author talks about early Arabs who arrived in America in chapters five and six. This time the author takes us back to the 16th century where she talks about the assistance that certain Arab navigators rendered to early European journeys to the New World. Haddad-Macron then moves on to talk about the first Arabs who arrived after the establishment of the United States. A few names of immigrants, who represent different social classes and professions, is provided here. Some of these immigrants returned to their country of origin, whereas some stayed in America and participated in the building of the new nation. The author draws our attention to the fact that Morocco was the first nation to recognize the United States as a sovereign and independent nation.

Haddad-Macron provides valuable information about the large wave of Arab immigrants who arrived in the United States most of whom were Syrians and Lebanese Christians villagers. Political and economic circumstances were the main factors, according to the author, that motivated them to come to America in the second half of the 19th century. By coming to the United States, these new arrivals sought mainly to improve their economic life and find a better political atmosphere. Haddad-Macron discusses in detail the challenges and prejudices that these immigrants had to face. One of the most significant challenges was the language barrier that led many immigrants in certain cases to change their Arab names into an Americanized version. The

author adds that on the whole the new arrivals integrated well into the new social and religious fabric of the American society. The intellectuals among them even established newspapers and printing houses in the big cities, such as New York.

It is only on page 110 of the book that the author began to talk about the main topic– the history of the Arab immigrants and their cultural experiences in Cleveland. Haddad-Macron opens this section with a caveat that there is a shortage of information about this topic because early Arab immigrants “were living their history, not writing or documenting it” (p. 110). Arab immigration into Cleveland began, according to the author, in the 1870s, but it was the ones who came in the 1890s that “put down the roots which would establish the present Cleveland Arab-American community” (p.111). Most of these immigrants were Syrians that came from two major villages, Zahle and ‘Antanite. Most of them “lived in the Haymarket District on Woodland, Orange, Carnegie and Webster Avenues, Bolivar Road, Eagle Street and the areas between East 9th and East 22nd Streets” (p. 112). Again, these early immigrants faced new challenges and different realities, but they were able to preserve their customs, social structures, and cultural identity. First, they worked in whatever trade they could find until they were able to save some money and open their own grocery stores, restaurants, diners, and other family-based business. At the same time, many parents recognized, according to the author, the importance of education for their children as a springboard for better jobs and life. The social life of the early Arab community revolved around home (family) and church. Such is the case the baptism and marriage that brought many members of the community together for celebration where social customs, religious practices, making food, and music intertwined. Of great importance was the wedding which “was not just a family event, but a community occasion, a weekend of festivities” (p. 129).

Haddad-Macron dedicates only the last few sections of this monograph to the experiences and personal stories of the early immigrants through interviews that she conducted with some members of the community. Thus, we encounter the name of Salim Caraboolad whose family members made many contributions to the Arab community (the creation of social and economic institutions in addition to churches) and American society. The author rightly highlights the important role that Arab women played in the life of their family and the Arab community. Such is the case with Deebe Sahley, Rose Joseph, Barbara Jacob, Helenie Farage, Julia Macron. The stories of these women demonstrate the difficulties and the hard work that early Arab families in Cleveland had to overcome. The author also touches upon religio-social customs practiced by the community, such the annual trip to the shrine of Our Lady of Consolation in Carey, Ohio, to pray, celebrate, and search for solutions to their health and social problems.

As American citizens, many of the Arabs of Cleveland fought in the American army in World War I against the Ottoman empire and its allies. In the early years of the 20th century Arab-Americans began to “intermarry with other nationalities and fast assimilating [sic] into the mainstream of American life (p. 166).” This trend of assimilation continued into the next decades as one can see in the story of Jamil Kaim, who in 1922 was elected as the president of St. Elias’ Church Council and later formed the first Syrian-Lebanese American Democratic Club in the nation. Another important social organization was the Syrian Junior League. The stories of Arab leaders provide a clear illustration of Arab Americans “who were admired and respected because they accomplished something, had gained success in business and politics in spite of the language and social barriers (p. 173).”

Attestations to the important role that the Arab immigrants played in the social life of Cleveland can be seen, according to the author, in many areas, such as theatre, education, and

business. Haddad-Macron shares with us, for example, the Edna Smith (Haddad) Shalala who was the “first woman attorney of Syrian-Lebanese descent to practice law in Cleveland” (p. 184). Or Raymond Shibley who “became the first blind student to receive a teaching certificate in the State of Ohio” (p. 187). The assimilation and the Americanization of the Arab community in Cleveland continued to evolve to the extent that it “was absorbed into the economic, educational, and social life of the mainstream” (p. 188).

Haddad-Macron dedicates a section to talk about the four major Arab American parishes in Cleveland in terms of history, structure, religious differences, and famous figures: St. Elias Melkite Byzantine Catholic Church, St. Maroon’s Maronite Catholic Church, St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church, and St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church. The book concludes with the new arrivals of Arabs to the Cleveland area most of whom were Palestinians as a result of the wars of 1948 and 1967. Comparing this wave of immigration to earliest ones, the author maintains that “unlike the first wave of the 1890’s [which] was begun out of necessity, not by choice.... The second wave, following the wars of 1948 and 1967 was fiercely nationalistic....” (p. 226). The American-Arabs were unable to detach themselves from the tragic events coming from the Middle East during the 1960s and 1970s as a result of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. They “found themselves forced to explain, debate, and to justify their existence in their own country.... [they] found themselves under surveillance at airports, railroads, and bus stations.” (pp. 229-230).

In sum, Haddad-Macron’s book is a great contribution to the history of Arab-Americans in Cleveland that pulls together a number of important landmarks in the history and experiences of this community. However, the book suffers from certain flaws in three major areas: organization, contextualization, and transliteration misspellings. It would have been better if the

author had organized the book better so the history and experiences of early Arab immigrants in Cleveland would be this undertaking and without so many digressions. The author used many interviews which should have been further analyzed and contextualized. Finally, book is full of misspellings when it comes to the transliteration of words and names in Arabic. Such is the case with al-Mashraq instead of al-Mashriq (p. 20), Saint Takla in Ma'lula and not Mabula (p. 32), Khatibit il Khatabb" (should be Katb li-ktab), "Il Leilat Ghosal" (should be laylat al-ghusl), and Zaghloot (should be zaghruta) (p. 123).