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Review of *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History* by Alan Mikhail

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rial defense between Morley, the Secretary of State for India, and Minto, the Viceroy, but he fails to mention the political pressures which led them to promulgate their famous reforms of 1909.

In the end, *Afghanistan and the Defence of Empire* provides a lucid and detailed account of the changing topography of the high politics of imperial defense during the Edwardian age. It helps us better understand how the “Great Game” faded into the shadows, giving way to other, deadlier imperial tournaments.

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EGYPT

Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History, by Alan Mikhail. Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 380 pages. \$95.

Reviewed by Stuart Borsch

This innovative book explores the interaction between the physical environment and the social structure of Ottoman Egypt and its relationship with the wider Empire. It is a highly original work which attempts to analyze the changes that accompanied Egypt’s transition from the early modern period to the beginning of modernization at the end of the 18th century. The use of sources in this book is creative, and the work stands out for its novel treatment of transformations of material life in Egypt.

The focus of the first chapter is the irrigation system of Ottoman Egypt. Mikhail cleverly employs two new source areas here. The first is a 16th-century Ottoman survey of the irrigation system located in the Egyptian National Archives. Mikhail’s analysis of this record supplies the reader with a wealth of new information about this irrigation system. The second is provincial court documents, which Mikhail uses in an original way to bring out of them a description of water rights and how they were negotiated

through court cases. He then provides a detailed analysis of competition and conflict over water resources. Mikhail is the first scholar to explore this subject, and it provides an important addition to our knowledge of the mechanics of Egypt’s irrigation system. Scholars of ancient and medieval Egypt will be very interested in this schematic. He has done a considerable service to the field here, and the book stands out as innovative and exceptional on the basis of this first chapter alone.

The first chapter also demonstrates how the use of the irrigation system tied together the interests of the peasant communities and the interests of the Empire in a cooperative relationship of mutual reliance and trust. Mikhail then explores the ways in which the Empire devolved authority to peasant communities, who were able to apply their practical, on the ground knowledge of how to manage the system. Finally, there is an analysis of the manner in which the irrigation system functioned as a lever of change in the economy and society of Ottoman Egypt. The themes here are a guide to the rest of this book, as it follows the story of interaction between the physical environment and social change.

The second chapter explores a model of early modern natural resource management. Mikhail does this via the lens of the commoners of Ottoman Egypt and how they developed and maintained the infrastructure needed to manage the flow of primary goods and their trade and consumption. He shows how the peasants worked in tandem with the Empire in this area, in the same way in which they mediated authority vis-à-vis the irrigation system.

In the third chapter, Mikhail analyzes the manner in which the supply of wood was managed in tandem with the supply of grain. He demonstrates how the Empire weighed choices regarding the use of raw materials in Ottoman Egypt and Ottoman Anatolia.

The fourth chapter details the manner in which the use of localized and autonomous labor slowly gave way to the mass employment of labor in ever larger projects managed by a rapidly growing state bureaucracy in the late 18th century. Mikhail describes how the management of work and labor shifted from a local to a centralized basis at

the end of the long 18th century.

In Chapter 5, "From Nature to Disease," Mikhail explores the dimensions of disease, specifically plague, and how conceptions of this disease changed in relation to the modernizing trends in the late eighteenth and early 19th centuries. Here and in the sixth and final chapter, we are provided with a description of the process of change in labor management and how it reflected broader issues of transformation of institutions and social structures in general.

One might take Mikhail to task for his categorization of environmental problems. While mismanagement of the irrigation system may have led to a temporary retraction in agricultural productivity, it is doubtful that this can be classified as long-term environmental damage. Minor caveats such as this aside, *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History* is an impressive work that tackles new issues in an innovative fashion and uses new sources creatively. The book is well written and, for those interested in the subject, a page turner. It is hoped that Mikhail's approach to this subject matter will elicit further studies in this fruitful area of research.

Stuart Borsch, Department of History, Assumption College, is the author of The Black Death in Egypt and England: A Comparative Study.

IRAN

We Lived to Tell: Political Prison Memoirs of Iranian Women, by Azadeh Agah, Sousan Mehr, and Shadi Parsi. Toronto, Canada: McGilligan Books, 2007. 239 pages. \$22.95.

Reviewed by Isis Nusair

With the increasing participation of women in recent revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa, *We Lived to Tell* is an important contribution to thinking about women's agency and resistance. It is also an important addition to recent publications of memoirs of women political prisoners. These include Fatna el Bouih's *Talk of Darkness* de-

scribing the experiences of Moroccan women political prisoners under the reign of King Hassan II, and Aisha Odeh's *Dreams of Freedom* describing those of Palestinian women political prisoners under the Israeli occupation. *We Lived to Tell* records the experiences of three women political prisoners during the Cultural Revolution in Iran in the 1980s. The book is introduced by Shahrzad Mojab. It is divided into three sections that document the stories of Sousan Mehr, Azadeh Agah, and Shadi Parsi as experienced and written by them. The three narratives go beyond the individual stories to constitute a testimony to those of friends and comrades in prison. The book addresses the question of what it means to remember and record these experiences and the wider political implications of such acts. It also raises the question of how state and religion collude in disciplining women's bodies and sexuality. Women political prisoners were "tortured, denigrated and vilified for being women and claiming an oppositional space. These women ruptured the boundaries of patriarchal-religious submissiveness, pushed their sexualized bodies into the public sphere and claimed rights" (p. 9).

The book depicts the differences as well as the bonds between women in prison. It relies on reflexive methodology and on diary and memory to record these experiences. *We Lived to Tell* provides a detailed description of torture that included an assault on women's political agency and autonomy. Torture in this context is gendered as the women were targeted by the Iranian authorities for opposing the state and for doing so as women. As the prison authorities controlled the minute details of these women's lives, they "thought of the prisoners as godless creatures that did not deserve to live like human beings" (p. 78). Their goal "was to make us as miserable and obedient as possible. Anything that made us happy or kept us busy and creative became an object of punishment" (p. 88). The authorities "believed we all needed to come to terms with our past, repent our 'sins,' and form new beliefs and attitudes toward the system. Any 'distracting' activity was deemed not conducive to positive change" (p. 112).

The book depicts the variety of modes of resistance that the women employed to survive that ranged from faith and devotion to their