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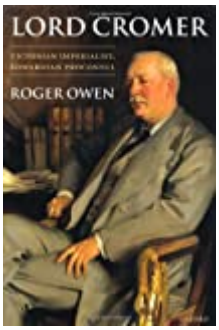

Roger Owen. *Lord Cromer: Victorian Imperialist, Edwardian Proconsul.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 436 S. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-925338-8.

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A Gentleman Capitalist on the Nile

A famous and influential subject, like Roger Owen's Lord Cromer, poses special challenges for the biographer. Such figures present multiple identities: the subject as regarded by his or her peers or by the public–an infinitely fractured identity; the historical memory of the subject, buffeted by the concerns and prejudices of later days; and, perhaps most revealing, what Owen calls "the invented self," the subjects' "attempts, implicitly or explicitly, to present themselves in a particular way to their family, friends, and colleagues, as well as, of course, to themselves" (p. x). The careful and judicious balancing of these many identities is the litmus test of good biography, among whose ranks we can now place Owen's *Lord Cromer*.

Lord Cromer is perhaps the least well known of the great triumvirate of late-Victorian imperial proconsuls. He had not the transparent hauteur of that "most superior person," Lord Curzon, nor a coterie of acolytes to gild his reputation, as did Lord Milner. More so than either of his proconsular peers, however, Cromer left an indelible personal stamp on the country–Egypt–which he administered. His was the closest case in the British Empire to personal rule, an irony in that Cromer was technically the head of an international and ostensibly temporary occupation to secure the repayment of Egypt's international debt (68 million in 1876, when Cromer first arrived). Cromer's influence was the result of his successful balancing of several competing forces: the Ottoman Empire, of which Egypt was technically a province; successive Khedives, who were Egypt's official masters; the ebb and flow of Egyptian nationalism; imperial rivals such as Charles Gordon and Herbert Kitchener; and the wavering support of British governments, especially Liberal. In his memoir, *Modern Egypt*, Cromer set out his participation in pulling Egypt out of financial crisis and establishing a rationally administrated state. *The Times* was less modest in its obituary, calling him the "Maker of Modern Egypt." Yet Cromer left Egypt in 1907 amidst controversy–Owen tellingly titles this chapter "Things Fall Apart," a sly postcolonial double entendre–and he is loathed in Egyptian national historiography.

As such, it is surprising that Cromer has attracted no full-length biography since the Marquess of Zetland's official *Lord Cromer* (1932). Owen's *Lord Cromer* thus fills

a substantial gap in the literature. It is a conventional biography, eschewing psychological speculation or other tropes of "creative non-fiction" for an empirical narrative account of Cromer's life, and is stronger for it. Part 1 quickly surveys Cromer's childhood and officer training in Corfu, Malta, and Staff College in Surrey. Born Evelyn Baring, Cromer came into his financial acumen naturally, his family the directors of London's preeminent banking house. Owen thus sees Cromer as a quintessential member of Cain and Hopkins's gentlemanly capitalist class (p. 4), further arguing that the simple "master-servant" relations of his Norwich upbringing and his military education predisposed him to imagine India and then Egypt as similar social hierarchies (pp. 12-13).

The evidence for Cromer's upbringing, however, is scant, as Owen openly acknowledges. His main source is Cromer's own *Biographical Notes*, written in old age as a moral tale of hard work and clean living taming a wayward soul. As such, it is self-justificatory and selective. The most notable event in Cromer's early life was his marriage to Ethel Errington, whom he met in Corfu and married in 1876. She was his private emotional anchor, the only person with whom the aloof, abrupt, elitist, and socially awkward Cromer ever felt truly comfortable. In Lytton Strachey's memorable words, "in all he did he was cautious, measured, unimpeachably correct ... he had a steely colourness, and a steely pliability, and a steely strength" (p. 235). Owen focuses in the main on the public Cromer. The private Cromer, despite Owen's best attempts, remains veiled; the sources simply do not exist. Owen writes that an awareness of a subject's public reputation is not sufficient for understanding (p. 392), and, reading between the lines, he seems somewhat disappointed that the sources do not allow him to dissect the private Cromer, to make him "live upon the page" (p. x). Yet the book's focus on the public Cromer is its strength. Reputation is a barometer of how others perceive and relate to a person; it is the individual's currency in the public market. By showing how Cromer's public reputation was formed and transformed throughout his life, we see him as others did, better understanding his influence.

Part 2 follows Cromer to India, Egypt, and India again as he climbed the imperial bureaucratic ladder. Owen argues that these apprenticeships shaped Cromer's later ideas on governance, notably a belief in low taxation, a paternal sympathy for peasants, the importance of leading rather than following public opinion, and an early interest in monitoring (a skeptic might say influencing) the press (p. 86).

These ideas were put into practice during Cromer's reign in Egypt from 1883-1907, the subject of part 3. This is the Cromer of history, and it is the book's most important and best section. Owen masterfully maps Cromer's transition from Gladstonian radicalism, favoring only a temporary occupation to set right Egypt's finances, to committed conservative imperialism, believing the British must stay because it would "not take years, but probably generations, to change the moral character of the Egyptian people" (p. 345). Cromer's financial successes are detailed in turn–consolidating Egypt's debt, attracting private capital to finance infrastructure projects such as the Aswan reservoir and railways, diminishing French influence on the Caisse de la Dette Publique (the international body created to oversee Egypt's payment of the interest on its international debt), and replacing the Victorian financial strategy of merely balancing resources and population with a professional financial system which collected and assessed financial data as a tool for creating economic growth.

One reason for Cromer's shift from Gladstonian liberal to imperial conservative was his immersion in the politics of British rule in Egypt. He grew frustrated with what he saw as Liberal pusillanimity over Gordon and the Sudan, and by the late 1880s the former self-professed Radical found common cause with Rosebery and the nascent liberal imperialists, and, ultimately, Salisbury. Cromer's later conservatism can also be explained as the natural reaction of a man in a position of entrenched power. He came to identify Egypt's interests with his own, stressing the need for British executive control in Egypt and criticizing his opponents at home as "British do-gooders who did not understand the realities of the exercise of imperial power" (p. 229). This arrogance of power became a hindrance in Cromer's later years, as revealed through his mishandling of the Dinshawai affair in 1906. In response to a disturbance between a British army battalion and villagers in the town of Dinshawai over the battalion's shooting of pigeons, in which an army captain died, Cromer authorized the hanging of four villagers, the flogging of eight more, and the arrest of several others. The severe sentence attracted immediate criticism in both Egypt and Britain, and the vigor with which Cromer afterward defended his position shows a loss of political perspective. He retired the next year.

Cromer's post-Egypt career, a series of mainly ineffective advocacy for rear-guard causes such as opposition to women's suffrage, are covered briefly in part 4. Owen might have looked more carefully at how Cromer's

Egyptian experiences shaped this post-Egypt work. As it stands, these chapters read like a miscellany of insignificant committee work, a reaction made more stark by the concluding chapter which follows, an excellent analysis of Cromer's career and influence which stands as a concise and insightful essay in its own right. It would make ideal reading, in tandem with John Darwin's *DNB* entry, for anyone seeking a brief picture of Cromer.

Indeed, the conclusion's explanatory and analytical approach might have been employed more often throughout. The book will make heavy going for non-specialist readers without a background in imperial politics, and even the specialist reader would benefit from more context. Because the focus is distinctly on Cromer, other actors, from Gordon to the Khedive Ismail to the Egyptian nationalist Mustafa Kamil, appear on stage fully formed, only to disappear once they have interacted directly with Cromer. More attempt to explain Cromer's broader imperial influence, as well as his place in Egyptian historiography, might also be rewarding. The occasional instances when he does step back, for instance suggesting that Cromer's compromise over the Ilbert Bill in India ironically inspired the political trajectory of Congress, leave the reader wanting more. In regard to Egypt itself, did Cromer's personal rule help create modern Egyptian nationalism, either as a reaction to his contempt for indigenous politicians, or in his creation of its modern economic and political preconditions? Owen advances some limited contemporary allusions in his concluding chapter, arguing that Cromer was a key figure in the first age of economic "globalization," and thus implicitly positioning him as an early modern thinker in this regard. Another such corollary–Cromer's deep mistrust and misunderstanding of Islam–might have been further pursued; not for its contemporary relevance, but as a further explanation of his poor relations with Egyptian nationalists. Did Cromer's own benign religious sensibilities or the challenge of the Mahdi account for his disregard for Islam, or, as Owen's evidence implicitly suggests, did he simply conflate it with colonial nationalism, a phenomenon he saw as "spurious?" (p. 382).

Owen's Cromer is an imperial social engineer. In Milner's words, "the best way out of Egypt is to march straight through it, to drive the ploughshare of reform from one end of the administration to another" (p. 240). That Cromer had a firm grip on the reigns was both a strength and a weakness. He established a modern economy in Egypt, yet never understood local sensibilities, doing much to create the anti-Western sentiment of later Egyptian history. In drawing on both Cromer's "invented self" and his public presence, Owen draws a fully realized portrait of his subject. *Lord Cromer* joins David Gilmour's *Curzon*, Peter Marsh's *Joseph Chamberlain: An Entrepreneur in Politics*, and Andrew Roberts's *Salisbury* as near definitive modern biographies of the high political masters of late-Victorian and Edwardian imperialism. We await only a replacement for A. M. Gollin's 1964 biography of Milner, *A Proconsul in Power*.

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