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Ian Collier, *Arab France: Islam and the Making of Modern Europe, 1798-1831*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011. xi + 288 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780520260641; \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780520260658; \$20.00 U.S. (e-book). ISBN 9780520947542.

Review essay by Julia Landweber, Montclair State University.

Collier has written a superb study of a group of people unduly forgotten by historians and pretty much everybody else, too. This is the history of several hundred Middle Eastern exiles who followed the last members of Napoleon's Grande Armée from Egypt to France in 1801, and who—joined by some additional emigrants arriving later—established themselves in Marseille, Melun and Paris. Collier collectively dubs this amorphous community “Arab France.” The choice of title signals the centrality of identity and geography to his project. Chronologically, the book's narrative is sandwiched between Napoleon's failed 1798 invasion of Egypt, which launched France's modern interest in the Arab world, and the more successful French colonization of Algeria in 1830, which solidified France's geopolitical interest in North Africa. The study ends in 1831 because Collier argues that the conquest of Algeria signaled the death-knell of Arab France, in the sense of any true accommodation between those two identities (and spaces).

A discussion of Collier's work ought to begin by noting some of its connections with the present. Indeed, Collier opens his preface with a remembrance of two French teenagers with distinctly Arab names who were killed in a Paris suburb during a 2005 police chase. He observes, “the paradox of French society today is that a nation that so long prided itself on its commitment to freedom and equality, its fearless intellectual critique, and its cosmopolitanism has been unable or unwilling to negotiate the realities of diversity and difference on its own soil” (p. vii). His study uncovers, to an impressive degree, the deep historical underpinnings of these realities. He argues, furthermore, that in the early nineteenth century French society could have taken a path other than it did, one in which peoples with non-European heritages, religions, languages, skin tones, and races had an opportunity to acquire an identity that included considering themselves, and being considered by others, as fully French.

Another link to the present is on the Arab-Egyptian side of this history. With a remarkable timing which must bring pleasure to both Collier and his publishers, the Egyptian revolution of 2011 will undoubtedly hove into the mind of anyone picking up *Arab France*. I sincerely hope this coincidence causes Collier's book to attract more attention than might otherwise be the case for any history, however excellent, focused on an obscure group of people who lived, died, and were largely forgotten nearly two centuries ago. To take but one example, it felt strangely prescient to read in chapter one of how the 1801 emigrants from Egypt declared themselves an “Egyptian Legation” dedicated to the political project of forging a modern independent democracy in Egypt (pp. 43-44). Now that President Hosni Mubarak has been toppled, Egyptians are again engaged in the process of reinventing their government. Most political analysts likely view the current situation as, at most, descending from Egypt's twentieth-century history. Collier demonstrates in detail how Egyptians have been wrestling with questions of modernization and democracy for well over two hundred years now, indeed since even before Napoleon's 1798 invasion.

The book consists of an introduction, eight chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction ably surveys the historiographical terrain surrounding the presence of Arabs in France, and both there and in subsequent chapters the latest scholarship on Napoleonic Egypt and France are expertly put to use. Collier also deploys a fine knowledge of orientalist studies and French-Ottoman relations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As is *de rigueur* in nearly every Anglophone history of relations between Europe and the lands and peoples of the Islamic world, Collier takes particular care to situate his project in relation to Edward Said's well-known critique of the uneven power dynamic supposedly built in to European discourses on the Middle East. [1] While Collier writes admiringly of Said's work, he correctly challenges Said's vision of a "Manichean binary" eternally dividing East from West (p. 13). Collier is hardly alone in questioning Said on this point, but he offers a finer revision than most by examining the very period Said thought crucial and finding a gallery of Egyptian Orientalists—entirely overlooked by Said—who took an extremely active role in forging their own representation within Western intellectual culture.

The first four chapters cover the period from the 1798 invasion of Egypt to the fall of Napoleon in 1814–1815, charting the experiences of the emigrants from their decision to seek political asylum in France in 1801, to their initial (forced) settlement in Marseille, to the gradual migration of some of them to Paris. The last four chapters consider the shifting fortunes of the emigrants during the period of political transition from Napoleon's 1815 departure to the Revolution of 1830 and the French conquest of Algeria. The book's organization seamlessly weaves together narrative, analysis, and historiography. To pick but one of the many lives illuminated here, chapter one opens en route to France with the dramatic death of the Egyptian Copt Ya'qub Hanna, "the first non-French general in the French army" (p. 21). General Ya'qub had been the leader of the 1801 emigration, and his death aboard ship was a severe blow for his followers. Despite his dying as the book begins, the fortunes of both his political project and his widow form recurring narrative elements throughout the book. The Egyptian Legation's correspondence with the foreign ministries of France and Britain was long attributed by historians to a European Knight of Malta who was part of the Egyptian Legation. By rereading these letters, which "drew upon the Enlightenment model of civilization in order to remind the French of what they owed to Egypt in a cultural and historical sense," Collier argues persuasively for Ya'qub's authorship, proving that "the ostensibly subaltern voices of the occupied [...] could speak articulately of their own national aspirations" (p. 45).

Thanks to Collier's tireless sleuthing and reassembling of the scattered archival records left by members of the Egyptian Legation and their descendants and followers, we come to know a great deal about the heterogeneous nature of this emigrant group, which included more Christians and Jews than Muslims and not just Arabs but also Copts, Syrians, Greeks, Turks, Armenians, Georgians, and even Franks (European Christians whose families had historically settled in Egypt and elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire). Collier demonstrates thoroughly that calling them all "Egyptians," as the Napoleonic bureaucratic system insisted on from 1801 forward, amounted to an almost willful ignorance on the part of the French government. Importantly, he also acknowledges that calling them Arabs "is inaccurate in every way except ... we must emphasize the longer trajectory in order to perceive the phenomenon at all. The 'Arab identity' described here was the result of a multiplicity of choices, of associations, and of reactions to external conditions sometimes conducive and sometimes coercive" (p. 19). In other words, *Arab France* is in large part the history of how a very mixed group of people forced into a minority status in a new country gradually learned to self-identify as a community (much in the vein of E.P. Thompson's 1963 *Making of the English Working Class*, which Collier cites as an important methodological influence). In the case of the Egyptian Legation, the thing which turned out to bond them together more than anything else was the Arabic language. They and their descendants learned to identify with their shared knowledge of Arabic for lack of a better unifying trait. Ironically, the French government actively collaborated in this process by providing free Arabic lessons to the refugees'

children in Marseille as of 1807. “Out of these classes would emerge a second generation carrying a new synthesis of French and Arab cultural identifications” (p. 68).

*Arab France* is thus also the history of how this very unlikely community of increasingly French-identified “Arabs” engineered a space for themselves within the bureaucratic and intellectual strictures of Napoleonic France. A century earlier, Arabic was so alien to the Paris population that the priests of Notre Dame could unwittingly display a Turkish cloth embroidered with the Muslim profession of faith in a procession celebrating the Eucharist, without anyone noticing.<sup>[2]</sup> But by 1807, a veritable “Egypto-Oriental colony” brimming with “Muslim cosmopolitanism” was taking shape in Paris (p. 76). Egyptian refugees such as Rufa’il Zakhur, Elias Pharaon, and Mikha’il Sabbagh, former interpreters to Napoleon’s Egyptian army, were hired in such prominent positions as, respectively, professor of Arabic at the École des Langues Orientales, curator of Arabic manuscripts at the Imperial Library, and diplomatic consul for the Ionian islands (p. 77). It is among these men and the generation which followed them, and their active participation within French intellectual and political life, that Collier’s “Arab France” truly takes shape.

Collier’s narrative and analytical strengths are evident throughout. He hews consistently to his stated goals of making “the experience of non-Europeans in Europe an intrinsic element of the narrative” and to “avoid[ing] the a priori assumption of a fundamental or uncrossable divide between Europe and the Muslim world on its borders” (p. 12). In this respect, *Arab France* is a conceptual descendent of Bernard Lewis’ *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*. The difference is that, by focusing more narrowly in terms of time and place, and by calling up an exquisite interplay of Egyptian and French voices, Collier paints a far more vividly human picture of East-West interactions than Lewis.<sup>[3]</sup> Non-European voices and emotional experiences are constantly invoked, quoted, and analyzed on an equal footing with Europeans, such as (in chapter one) the Egyptian historian Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti, who recorded his own eyewitness accounts of the Napoleonic invasion as well as of the departure preparations of the Egyptian Legation; and (in chapter seven) the Egyptian writer-intellectual Rifa’a al-Tahtawi, who traveled to Paris in 1826 with an Egyptian student group and later published his distinctive travel observations as *The Extraction of Refined Gold in the Summary of Paris* (p. 169). All of these elements combine to make *Arab France* a thoroughly enjoyable reading experience.

The entire idea of an “Arab France” present in France for such a brief window of time raises a question, however, only partially addressed by Collier: why was it possible to identify as an Egyptian Arab, but yet never entirely as a French Arab? Both seem equally hybrid identities, yet one was apparently a more natural concept than the other. At multiple points Collier addresses the conundrum of individuals who were prevented from fully realizing their sense of belonging to France, while being compelled by largely external forces to identify in France as Egyptian Arabs. A good example is the case of Joseph Agoub, born in 1795 in Cairo to a Syrian Melkite Catholic mother and an Armenian father but raised in France from the age of six by his mother and a French step-father. Agoub matured within the Egyptian refugee community of Marseille, surrounded by “the mixture of Arab and European customs” where “it seemed...that Egypt had somehow become combined with France, and that the two nations were confused into one” (p. 152). A poet, Agoub was drawn equally to French literature and the Arabic language. He considered himself an “Arab” imbued with “Frenchness” (p. 160). But in his quest for patronage and literary success, he was forced by editors and critics to assume an “Egyptian” identity not of his choosing because for many the foreign exoticism Egypt represented was what made him interesting (pp. 162-63). In other words, Collier’s thesis provides a new angle to the question so fashionable lately among historians of the Hexagon: what is so special about Frenchness? In the conclusion, Collier suggests that the Napoleonic position on racial categories was the first barrier to total integration and a precursor to the Revolution of 1830, after which “the ‘foreigner’ became an unwelcome category in France [and] what was unmade was the possibility of being both French and Arab at once” (p. 214). A more extended discussion of these historical issues would be fascinating to read.

To return to the present: the day I began *Arab France*, the lead story in the New York *Times* “Week in Review” section was an article reflecting upon how the revolutions and political upheavals which have surged across the Arab world this year are influencing individuals’ sense of identity in unexpected ways. After asking provocatively, “Can Turkey Unify the Arabs?” journalist Anthony Shadid writes that shadows of the Ottoman past are suggesting to many people across the Middle East ways to reconcile the “smaller claims of piety, sect and clan” with a defiance of “the identities that borders inspire.”[4] By stressing how historical interconnections of commerce and culture can overcome divisions of language and religion, as well as by invoking the links which once bound together a very disparate set of peoples under Ottoman rule, Shadid uncannily echoes the complex identity issues woven through much of Coller’s book. In turn, reportage such as Shadid’s article suggests how valuable Coller’s study should be for people seeking to understand the complexities both of modern Middle Eastern identities and of the long history of travel and exchange linking the Islamic world to western Europe.

Coller has produced a truly interdisciplinary and significant work of scholarship, carefully and creatively researched and beautifully written, of an unduly neglected group of people. This book will be of great interest to modern scholars of ethnic hybridity and intercultural exchange, as well as anyone seeking to better understand the deep history underlying modern European-Arab interrelations.

#### NOTES

[1] Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

[2] This may be an apocryphal tale, but Antoine Galland put it in his 1709 diary as fact. See Nicholas Dew, *Orientalism in Louis XIV’s France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 1-2.

[3] Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982).

[4] Anthony Shadid, “Can Turkey Unify the Arabs?” *The New York Times*, May 29, 2011, p. WK1.

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