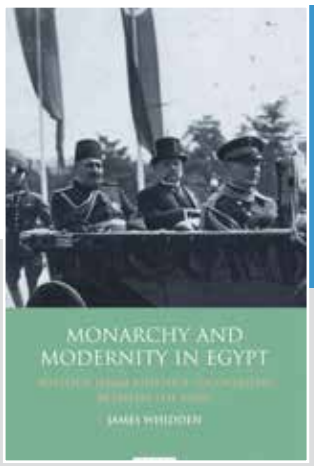
ain, with exceptional moments, like 1882, 1919, 1942, and 1956 being exceptions to the rule. But yes, the dominant narrative imagined Egypt as an integral part of the British empire, with Egyptian nationalism characterized as a threat to minorities, particularly Christians or Jews. Also, nationalists were characterized as irresponsible, incapable of conducting a modern economy and government. Therefore, on the basis of defending religious minorities and the well-being of the average Egyptian (the fellahin), the British justified or legitimized the denial of self-determination to the Egyptians. And the British public generally bought this official doctrine.

(Whipple Library in the University of Cambridge)

A political cartoon which features John Bull as a British soldier physically protecting Egypt, who is depicted as the sexualised female object of Orientalist fantasy, passively leaning into Bull's arms. The Turkish Sultan pleads with Britain 'to consider whether the time has not now arrived for her return to the arms of her loving uncle.

This position was remarkably durable, so that even after the Second World War, the Labour government in London was unwilling to abandon the British stewardship of the Egyptian fellahin. Nor was the Labour government in 1924 willing to abandon the British military bases. Of course, the mainstream imperialist doctrine in the hands of figures like Churchill reduced the room for substantial reform by Labour or others. The dominant narrative was always made in the name of national security interests and marked dissenters as traitors to the national cause. That is a very difficult narrative to counter. But it would mean giving in to despair to suggest that there was no alternative. Members of the colony, like Michael Barker, established the Victoria Trust, which can be viewed as an attempt at reconciliation, and changed the purpose of British institutions in Egypt. It was a form of compensation. We can see more comprehensive attempts at reconciliation and compensation in contemporary Australia, Canada, and South Africa through truth and reconciliation commissions. These steps offer hope. I see my narrative in this light. Even though it is hard to see how imperialistic/nationalistic ideologies can be undermined, historians can create narratives that at least pose the possibility that they might, which, I think, is an important first step.

What can we make of the British "taste for the exotic" and its role in public memory of Egypt in Britain? E. M. Forster's account of 'The Den' and his lamenting "another casualty to the forces of modernity", although sympathetic in nature, has an orientalist ring to itself, don't you agree?



Brilliant observation, and that points to the difficulty of cross-cultural relations, particularly that people carry so many misperceptions, or colonial fantasies, that are very difficult to break down. The interesting thing about Forster was that he was aware of his prejudices toward the Egyptians and was disappointed that he was unable to fully break the mold. The Orientalist othering of Egyptians as exotic specimens of a different culture did, however, go hand-in-hand with his friendships with ordinary Egyptians, like the Egyptian tram conductor, Muhammad al-Adl. There's nothing very exotic about a tram, in fact it was this sort of modernization and homogenizing of the world that he was lamenting. But he was able to embrace the positive in these changes, crossing the racial boundary that many colonials held as impermeable, an unbreakable rule. Also, his friendship with Egyptians meant that he took a public voice against the British military occupation after the First World War. During the war he worked for the Red Cross, one of those institutions that has had a more positive cultural legacy in the region. My study of Egyptian nurses in Egypt demonstrates a category of colonizer that was not so ideologically loaded, most came to Egypt to earn a living and carried with them the humanitarian codes of their profession, disinterested public service, and many British colonizers fall into that category.

Why couldn't the "British imperial identity formulated by Lord Cromer" gain ground in colonial Egypt? What difference is there between the Egyptian and the Indian colonial experiences?

India began as a British commercial monopoly and evolved into an imperial state, recognized as such by British Parliament and governed as a department of the British state. Egypt was not a formal part of the empire in that sense. It was only briefly held as a protectorate between 1914 and 1922. There were similarities in British attitudes toward Egyptians and Indians, for instance Muhammad Mahmud (an Egyptian prime minister) recalled that British officers would not let Egyptian horses be stabled alongside British horses, which suggests that the caste-like prohibitions of the British Raj in India existed also in Egypt. Also, Edward Said recalled that 'Arabs' were not allowed at the Gezira sporting club. In spite of these signs of racial coding, British colonizers experienced difficulty in sustaining an exclusivist imperial identity in the face of nationalist opposition and the everyday realities of colonial life. Forster's work, 'A Passage to India', demonstrates that ambiguity. Perhaps one difference however was that Egypt went through a process of modernization under an Egyptian administration before the British occupation. The British intervention was seen by Egyptians as interrupting an indigenous movement of self-transformation, whereas in India, the British occupation was more gradual and over a longer period. English became one of many languages in the subcontinent and was generally accepted among the Indian elites, but the English language was always resisted in Egypt in favour of Arabic or French. The British were not really committed to a 'civilizing mission' in Egypt to the degree we see in sub-Saharan Africa or India, or in French colonies like Algeria, which meant the British were less willing to interfere with indigenous culture. In part this is a result of the sequence of colonization, Egypt was colonized after the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, which taught the British that to interfere with indigenous cultures was dangerous. Lord Cromer had a hands-off policy when it came to missionary activity, very unlike the situation in Africa or India.

On a side note, although Iran has never been a British colony, it has been at times tragically subject to Britain's imperialistic ambitions. Why do you think these ambitions never amounted to something like British Raj or colonial Egypt?

Australian troops, who were guarding the Suez Canal and other British positions in Egypt, rest after a march, in the shade of the Great Pyramids of Cheops and the Sphinx, on March 17, 1916.

The Iranian and Egyptian examples show some similarities. Imperial power was always exercised through existing Iranian or Egyptian authorities. Was Reza Shah invented (I mean put on the throne) by the British or did the British simply attempt to use him (not always successfully) to extend their strategic and economic interests? Reza Shah found a counter to British influence in Germany. The Qajar Shahs played Russians off against British. In Egypt Muhammad Ali was very adept at manipulating European powers to achieve his power ambitions. Ismail, less successfully, but King Fuad was also an able manipulator of British agents to perpetuate the power of the dynasty founded by Muhammad Ali. As we know now, the British and the Americans worked together to bring about the restoration of the Shah's power in 1953. Iran between 1953 and 1979 shows some similarities with Egypt between 1922 and 1952. A foreign military power sustained unpopular dynasties, with coercion in 1942 in an infamous moment in Egyptian history comparable to 1953. These sorts of interventions doomed the old regimes of Egypt and Iran.