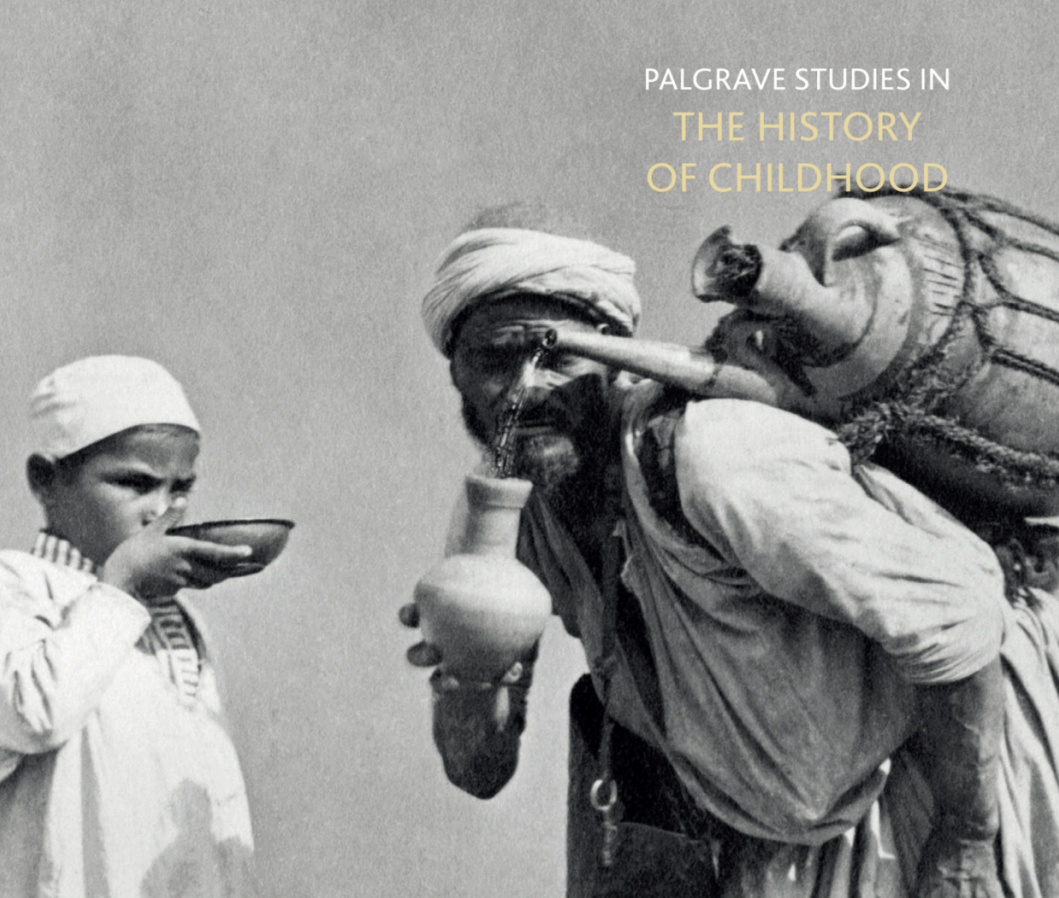
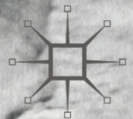


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Childhood and Colonial Modernity in Egypt

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Childhood and Colonial Modernity in Egypt

Heidi Morrison

Assistant Professor, University of Wisconsin, La Crosse, USA

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For my mom and dad

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Note on Transliteration and Translation</i>	xii
Introduction	1
1 Reforming Childhood in the Context of Colonialism	23
2 Nation-Building and the Redefinition of the Child	43
3 Child-Rearing and Class	62
4 Girls and the Building of Modern Egypt	85
5 Constructing National Identity through Autobiographical Memory of Childhood	99
Conclusion	123
<i>Glossary</i>	128
<i>Notes</i>	129
<i>Bibliography</i>	156
<i>Index</i>	173

Figures

1.1	Studio portrait	23
2.1	Photo spread of a children's contest	43
2.2	Performing first aid on a child at summer camp	52
2.3	"Student working with his friend in the carpentry workshop after school"	55
2.4	"A pupil incites his compatriots to work for the service of the nation"	55
2.5	"Boy in western suit thanking his father in traditional attire"	57
2.6	"Intelligent, nice boy George Harmoush in Arab dress"	58
3.1	<i>Baba Sadiq</i> children's magazine <i>From right to left</i> : Ahmad Samir, Hanefa Muhammad Fatha, and Nabil Wahabe.	62
3.2	"Boy and his ball with which he plays"	73
3.3	"Children listening to the sound from the speaker"	74
3.4	"A young boy using a typewriter"	75
3.5	"Child having fun driving his car"	75
3.6	"Lecture about proper children's clothing held at the Centre for Childrearing"	82
3.7	Poem, "The Peasant's Anthem"	83
4.1	"A girl reviews her agenda and checks the time on her wristwatch. With his right hand, her brother points to the watch in his left hand"	85
5.1	"All the women are in the great factory [the kitchen]! Oh, dear God, am I in a room or in a tomb? These hard days have put me in a difficult position!"	99

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As a high school student, I spent a summer in Egypt with the widow of the esteemed late Middle East historian Malcolm Kerr. During the tumultuous Lebanese civil war of the 1980s, Malcolm was president of the American University of Beirut. Islamic extremists assassinated him in his office, leaving behind his wife Ann and four children. Ann did not let the unjust and untimely loss of her husband blind her to seeing that the killers did not represent the majority of the Middle East. Ann brought high school students to the Middle East to educate about the region, in hopes of building better US–Arab relations. The catastrophic death of Malcolm set me on the path to becoming a professor of modern Middle East history. My hope for this book is to play a small part in continuing the legacy of Ann and

Malcolm's breadth of humanity. This book is, in part, dedicated to the children of Egypt: past, present, and future.

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Note on Transliteration and Translation

For the Arabic transliterations, I have followed the system used by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. The Glossary at the end of the book lists some important Arabic words used in this book. The translations are all mine, unless otherwise noted.

Introduction

At the end of the summer of 1920, seven-year-old Egyptian ‘A’isha returned to her hometown of Dumyat to find her childhood turned upside down. While she and her family had been visiting relatives in the countryside, underwater demons had eaten her girlfriends back home. At least that is what ‘A’isha initially thought had happened to her playmates when she did not see them one afternoon at their usual meeting place on the bank of the Nile. ‘A’isha’s thinking was in line with Egyptian lore, which attributed much of the unknown to invisible good and bad spirits.¹ Inquiring around the neighborhood, she discovered that the girls were in reality safe and sound, sitting in rows of chairs indoors, wearing uniforms and reading books. Excited to join them in their new endeavor, ‘A’isha ran home to ask permission from her father. He informed ‘A’isha that these girls had indeed been consumed by a demon: the new government-run school.

‘A’isha’s father, a religious scholar, said that no daughter of his would study anywhere except in the home. “The school corrupts,” he declared, commenting on the new government-sponsored, secular schools that were popping up in Egypt alongside the longstanding religious schools.² He ordered ‘A’isha to read a verse from the Qur’an about the Prophet’s wives. She wanted to retaliate against her father’s conservative interpretation of the Qur’anic verse, but remained silent out of fear. For the next few months, ‘A’isha watched longingly through the window of her house as the schoolgirls in her neighborhood passed by every day.

Were it not for ‘A’isha’s mother approaching her own father about the matter, her daughter might never have gone to school. The

maternal grandfather, who was also a religious scholar, made a deal with his son-in-law to let 'A'isha go to school on condition that she also continued her religious studies at home and that she stopped attending at 13 years of age. 'A'isha's father agreed.

When 'A'isha reached 13, she wanted to continue her schooling, but there was no high school in her area. Her mother snuck her out of town to take a placement test, and sold her own gold bracelets to buy 'A'isha a ticket for a school in Cairo, but 'A'isha's father covertly sabotaged the process by making sure there was no spot for his daughter in the school when she arrived there. Eventually, 'A'isha returned to Dumyat to appease her father, and studied on her own at home. 'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman, known today in Egypt as *Bint al-Shati* (Girl of the Shore), held various academic posts and wrote on religion and women's rights until her passing in 1999.

One afternoon, at seven years of age, 'Abd al-Rahman suddenly found herself at the center of different expectations about how she should spend her childhood. 'Abd al-Rahman's father thought that home, religion, and family could provide the best upbringing for her, whereas government leaders favored the new schools. Within 'Abd al-Rahman's family, there were also different ideas about her future. The tug of war that ensued was similar to that experienced by many other children, boys and girls, across Egypt at the time. Girls customarily spent their childhood at home doing chores and learning homemaking skills. Daughters of the economic elite or daughters whose fathers were religious clergy (such as 'Abd al-Rahman) received a basic religious education from a private tutor. Even though government primary schools for girls had operated in a limited number since 1873, the idea was still foreign to most Egyptian families in the early twentieth century. Many boys at the time also found their childhood disrupted by the new prospect of attending government schools: primary schools for them had operated in a limited number since 1837. Parents weighed the options of sending their sons to these schools or continuing the customary routine of attending religious schools and working the land.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a pivotal period in Egyptian history. The country was searching for an identity in the face of intensifying western imperialism, the emerging nation-state, changing gender roles, and a rising middle class. In the context of colonialism, Egypt's encounter with these forces