

Egypt's one-way traffic in books

Historian Khaled Fahmy describes how historic Egyptian books are more easily found in Western than in Egyptian libraries - and how a scholarly history of the Middle East was recently banned from entering Egypt.



In recent weeks I encountered two incidents that made me feel extremely sorrowful about the situation of books, reading, and indeed culture, in Egypt. The first happened in New York City and requires a bit of background.

For the past few years I have been working on a book that tackles the social and cultural history of Egypt during the 19th century. The book includes two chapters on the history of medicine. The first is about the history of Kasr Al-Aini medical school and public hospital founded in 1827; the second deals with the history of public health in the country at large.

One of the central questions I pose in these two chapters regards how Egyptian society perceived modern medicine. I particularly explore those procedures that, at first glance, may be seen as

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offensive to religious beliefs and social traditions, such as dissection, vaccination and post-mortem examinations, especially of women's bodies.

In order to answer these questions, I spent years conducting research in the Egyptian National Archives. There I uncovered scores of fascinating original documents that shed light on the reaction of average Egyptians to such novel practices and institutions as vaccination against smallpox, modern hospitals, government clinics and the elaborate measures to collect and update vital statistics. What I had greater trouble learning about, though, were the opinions of physicians themselves on these new practices.

It is well known that the first batch of students to enter the Kasr Al-Aini Medical School had earlier studied at Al-Azhar and therefore had considerable knowledge of sharia law and fiqh (dogma), so I was keen to learn what they thought of the modern medicine they were now learning in their new school.

The Egyptian National Archives, rich in information about patients frequenting Kasr Al-Aini, is paradoxically not very informative about the hospital's teachers and doctors. I therefore decided to move to the adjoining building, the National Library, to look for books that these doctors might have published.

Here I was aided by researchers such as Aida Nosseir who had compiled bibliographies of the first books published by the famous Boulaq Press, Egypt's oldest printing house. Amazingly, about one-third of Boulaq's publications in its first 30 years of existence were medical titles.

Most of these medical books were translated into Arabic from French by Kasr Al-Aini's earliest graduates, those same students who had earlier studied at Al-Azhar. Some were not translations but books originally written in Arabic. Having compiled a list of 30 such books, I was keen to finally sit down and read them in the National Library. My hopes were quickly dashed, as the National Library is, to put it gently, a total mess. Readers' services are unheard of, catalogues are designed to misguide and confuse readers, and staff members act offended if approached for help and advice.

Worse still, I was able to find only a few of the books I was looking for. The majority of the titles I had hoped to consult were simply not there. When I asked the "librarians" (I feel obliged to use quotation marks so as not to offend this venerable profession), I was met with bemused looks from people who could not understand why an apparently sane person could possibly be interested in consulting such out-of-date medical books. They curtly told me the books were in restoration, misshelved, or missing. I lost all hope of ever finding these books in the National Library and instead satisfied myself with the gems of archival, non-published material I had found in the National Archives.

Then, to my utter surprise, I came across these books in New York. Two weeks ago, I went to

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Bobst Library at New York University to check some citations. As anyone who has been to Bobst knows, Philip Johnson apparently designed the building for no other reason than to induce vertigo in its patrons. Throughout my years of working in Bobst, I would avoid the harrowing experience of gazing down its massive, space-wasting light shaft and would head straight down to the basement. There, and to my extreme joy, I found out that Bobst has 89 of Boulaq's earliest medical books on microfiche.

Knowing that these amazing Egyptian books were missing from Egypt's National Library, I was intrigued to discover how a microfiche copy of them ended up in a small, relatively new and far from beautiful university library in New York City.

A small notation mentioned at the head of each fiche gave me a clue. The paper originals from which these fiches were copied were housed in the library of the University of London, specifically that of SOAS, the School of Oriental and African Studies. One question remained: Why was the University of London interested in acquiring 19th-century Arabic medical books that had been translated from French?

The plot thickened. The collection of fiches went beyond medicine to include an Arabic translation of an Italian manual on how to dye silk, the first book ever published in Boulaq (1823). The latest book in the collection was a book on mathematics published in 1850.

Why was the University of London library interested in acquiring this eclectic collection of Boulaq publications? And if they were keen on preserving the earliest publications of this pioneering press, something that the Egyptian National Library apparently was not as keen on doing, why did they stop acquiring these books in 1850 despite the fact that Boulaq is still in operation?

I had a hunch that the answer to this question lied in an event that took place the following year, the 1851 inauguration of the Crystal Palace Exhibition in Hyde Park, London. As is well known, this was the first in a series of World's Fair exhibitions that were subsequently held in such cities as Paris, Chicago and Vienna. The 1851 London Exhibition, besides being the first of these impressive fairs, was specifically designed to celebrate industry and technology. Organized by Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's consort, it was meant to reflect the new belief that industry and technology had the answers to all of humanity's dreams. The huge Crystal Palace constructed of iron and glass was meant to demonstrate man's triumph over nature.

Less known, perhaps, is the fact that Egypt participated in this exhibition and that the Egyptian pavilion was as large as Turkey's even though Egypt was still, technically and legally, only a mere province within the Ottoman Empire.

Browsing through the exhibition's catalogue, scanned and available online thanks to Google, I found a detailed description of the artefacts Egypt sent, a list that showed the level of science and technology Egypt had reached by that time. Among the 391 pieces on show were an Egyptian

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plough, mint water from Rosetta, a water pipe, “cap of fellah in brown beaver” and refined sugar from Ibrahim Pasha refineries. In the midst of this amazing Borgesian list of exhibits stands item number 248: “One hundred and sixty-five volumes of works in Turkish, Arabic and Persian, published at Boulac.”

This must be how these books made their way to the University of London’s Library. When the Egyptian delegation headed by Captain Abdel Hamid returned to Egypt, they must have left behind these books, which were then likely donated to the University.

What I found most amazing about this story is that back in 1851, when Egyptian officials decided to join the Great Exhibition, they considered 165 books recently published in Boulaq worthy to be included in this fair. Looking at the very humble nature of the other artefacts, these books probably occupied pride of place in the Egyptian pavilion.

There was certainly something to brag about. This collection of modern medical books, translated into Arabic only a few years after they had been published in French, showed an awareness of state-of-the-art medical literature, as well as the ability to produce elegant books in a clear script on fine paper and in impressive leather binding.

When one delves into these books, as I did to my utter joy in the basement of Bobst, one finds another source of amazement. For one thing, the rhyming introductions penned by Arab editors and translators showed an acute awareness of the huge volume of Arabic-Islamic medieval medical lore and an extreme comfort in building on it when translating modern medical literature. One can easily see the deep sense of self-confidence and pride at the accomplishments of both the Kasr Al-Aini Medical School and the Boulaq Press. This huge project of publication was not about “borrowing form the ‘Other’” or “catching up with the West”, as we are wont to say nowadays, but about resurrecting an art that used to thrive in Egypt but that had long since perished.

After days of tracking the story of these books and many more days actually reading them, a deep despondency descended upon me. There I was sitting at a library in New York City reading medical books that had been printed in Cairo that I failed to find back home. Whereas the University of London Library served its purpose as an institution of learning by microfiching these books and making them available to a wider readership, our libraries are still informed by a philosophy of hoarding knowledge at best and losing books at worst, including books that are considered rare publications.

And then I found myself dealing with the second incident to which I referred at the beginning of this article. At around the same time I was basking in the pleasure of having found these rare books, I was informed that a textbook I had requested to use for one of my courses at the American University in Cairo (AUC) had been banned by the national Office of Censoring Publications.

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The book in question, [A History of the Modern Middle East](#) by William Cleveland and Martin Bunton, is considered to be among the best textbooks on the subject and one that has been used numerous times at AUC. On investigating the matter further, we were told that the Office of Censoring Publications (and yes, post-revolution Egypt still has an office with that title) objected to a number of maps in the book that put Halayeb and Sahlateen on the other side of the Egyptian-Sudanese border. The Office of Censoring Publications was eventually gracious enough to propose correcting the offensive maps by hand, only after which were they unbanned.

Thinking about these two incidents, I couldn't help but compare our conditions in 1851 and in 2012. During the mid-19th century we were truly a civilised nation. We approached science with a spirit of free inquiry, not stopping twice to think about its provenance and not bothering about questions of authenticity, national identity or national security. By contrast, after our universities and libraries had failed even to preserve the books we had once translated and published, and after squandering our scientific achievements, we have been forced to seek our own scientific productions abroad.

Then, to add insult to injury, we have handed over the responsibility of protecting national security to employees at a censoring authority that has thechutzpah to name itself the Office of Censoring Publications and that proves through their mediocrity an utter ignorance of anything to do with knowledge, science or scholarly research.

My despondency, nay, fury, does not stem from the harm I know has befallen free speech and academic freedom by those in charge of our national security. I too am concerned for our national security. My fury arises from a deep conviction I hold that national security is never achieved by banning books. It is achieved, rather, by disseminating them.

[Khaled Fahmy](#) is professor and chair of the history department at the American University in Cairo. This essay was originally published in [Literature News](#) in Arabic and on [Ahram Online](#) in English. It is reproduced here with the author's and publishers' permission.

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