

REVIEW ARTICLE

Edward William Lane 1801-1876. The Life of the Pioneering Egyptologist and Orientalist. By JASON THOMPSON. London: Haus Publishing, 2010. X, 747 pp. ISBN 978 1 906598 72 3

Admirers of the life and achievements of Edward William Lane have long been greatly in debt to Jason Thompson for the services he has rendered to the outstanding English Arabist, from among whose works especially two will never cease to be basic tools on the desk of every student of Arabic culture and Egypt, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* and *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*. The latter was originally written as part of his magisterial *Description of Egypt* and was published separately for practical and economic reasons. Lane never gave up the hope that the basic *Description of Egypt* would see the light one day; however, it was not to be in the author's lifetime. It was not until 2000 that the book finally came out in printed form (Lane 2000). Of course many people had been aware of the existence of the manuscript, wishing to be able one day to read this *magnum opus*, whose halo had grown to supernatural extents in the meantime: If *The Manners and Customs*, which is only a section of this work, is such an unparalleled miracle, then what treasures can be lingering in the unpublished manuscript of the complete book? I vividly recall my stupefaction when I first learned of the existence of such a work still unpublished. I could hardly believe it was true that nobody had regarded as important to see it through the press. But then Jason Thompson finally did so. It was a great joy to read it but at the same time there was a considerable tinge of sadness in this joy too. Namely, much of it, which would have been pioneering knowledge when it was written, had inevitably become dated in the meantime. Even so it is a most important achievement and an important reference work, the use of which could be incomparably enhanced if the Publisher, the American University in Cairo Press, could be persuaded at last to supply it with *an index, the absence of which is most acutely felt*. It is not late even now! The *Description of Egypt* will remain a basic reference work. An index in a separate booklet or handy fascicle would be even easier to peruse than one placed at the end of a bulky volume¹. As Jason Thompson tells me, the manuscript of the index is ready.

¹ See Ormos 2001.

Thompson's care also manifested itself in seeing through the press and providing with an expert introduction a reprint of the definitive 1860 version of *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*. This was published in 2003. Simultaneously he also published two important articles with sections *omitted* from the published 1860 edition because of strict contemporary Victorian morals (Thompson 1995 and 2006). These sections concern sexuality, bodily functions, personal cleanliness, and similar things that contemporary Victorian society considered unworthy of being mentioned in decent company (Thompson 2010: 379-380). They are most interesting and this reviewer would strongly advise the author to consider adding them – for the benefit of the reader – as an *appendix* to future editions of *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*. It must be remarked, however, that the English translation of a Latin sentence of central importance concerning the way defloration is executed on the wedding night lacks accuracy in the details – the English translation of this passage is included in the Lane Biography too (Thompson 2010:380-381). It seems that the good Dominican father who assisted Thompson in preparing the Latin translation was not sufficiently familiar with the subject matter, and was deficient in imagination too. However, in view of the simplicity of the Latin of the whole passage it is hard to believe that he should have misunderstood it. Maybe he was so embarrassed by the contents that he offered a relatively decent version instead? In any case, the Latin passage in question and the corresponding English translation adopted by Thompson run – with the problematic part in emphasis:

Tum sponsus, omnia sponsae vestimenta, praeter subuculam, detrahit, et si more communi se conformet, non membro virili, sed digito suo (fimbriâ sponsae subuculae, aut sudarii ex nebulâ lineâ confecti, circumvolutâ) hymenem perrumpit...

Then the bridegroom removes all of the bride's clothing, except the shirt, and if he conforms to custom, breaks her hymen not with his virile member but with his finger (*raising up the hem of the bride's shirt, or undershirt made of transparent linen*)... (Thompson 2006:12-13).

The correct translation runs:

Then the bridegroom removes all of the bride's clothing, except the shirt, and if he conforms to custom, breaks her hymen not with his virile member but with his finger (*with the hem of the bride's undershirt or that of a fine, thin handkerchief wound around [his finger]*)...²

² *Nebula linea* was the equivalent of transparent fabrics, such as "muslin," "gauze," "silk" in New Latin. Thus "A muslin handkerchief" was rendered as *Sudarium ex nebula linea confectum*.

The sense of this seemingly odd procedure is of course that the piece of fine textile gets stained with blood in the course of the operation, which then can be used as a proof of the bride's virginity and be shown to the guests at the wedding party.

Now Jason Thompson has published a detailed biography of Edward William Lane. Although a great admirer of Edward William Lane myself, at first sight I was slightly taken aback by the sheer size of the work (x, 747 pp.; 23 cm) and asked myself if the life and career of this truly outstanding Arabist really deserved such a detailed treatment. Now, having finished reading the book from cover to cover I must admit that my doubts have been dispelled completely. Jason Thompson keeps the reader spellbound from beginning to end: I was practically unable to put the bulky volume down until I finished reading it all.

It is a great asset of the work that the author does not have preconceived *theses* and refrains from *interpreting* his subject at great length – of course there are some efforts at interpretation, especially a brief evaluation of Edward Said's view of Lane and of his achievements. Thompson also deals with an aspect I find particularly annoying in Lane, namely his deep immersion into Egyptian society, accompanied by an ever present detachment. Personally I find it very disturbing that we have to imagine Lane as a person who in every single human interaction with Egyptians was always thinking first and foremost of his future *magnum opus*, considering these persons primarily as informants. I, personally, find this aspect of Lane hardly palatable. However, leaving these aspects beside, we have in our hands a work full of unadulterated data in such plenty that the reader is truly amazed. Thompson follows up every minute of Lane's life as far as records allow him to do so, elucidating details concerning Lane himself but also all his relatives and acquaintances who appear in the course of his long life. And the picture that emerges is truly amazing, throwing light on important aspects of both British and Egyptian societies as well as the nascent world of Oriental studies. The human lives emerging from these pages are spellbinding. In the view of the present reviewer nothing is more fascinating than pure unadulterated data. That is what we have in the present book in plenty. Since many of these data concern the birth of such basic reference works as Lane's *Lexicon* and *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, they help the reader in arriving at a better assessment of the data encountered in them. Other data concern Lane's relatives, friends and acquaintances, such as Stanley Lane Poole

Nebula linea is attested as "a very thin veil" in Petronius already. In general, *nebula* can denote anything very thin of its kind, e.g., wool, clothes or sheet metal. Ainsworth 1751: Part 1, s.v. "muslin". Cf. Entick 1771: s.vv. "gauz[e]," "muslin". Leverett 1837:562 [*nebula*: anything thin of its kind]. Georges 1913-18:662, 1119. Entick 1822:319.

and Robert Hay for instance, who also played an important role in the “discovery” of Egypt.

The present reviewer is most grateful for the publication of this book. There remains little room for criticism. The book is nicely produced, lends itself to easy reading and misprints are few. The only thing I could perhaps remark is that acknowledging the great importance of Lane’s *Lexicon*, Thompson emphasises this aspect perhaps too often. Less would have been more³. On the other hand, I am aware that the mere size of the present book seems to have invited the author to do so by offering so many occasions in various contexts, for which he is of course to be pardoned.

As far as the *Wörterbuch der Klassischen Arabischen Sprache (WKAS)* is concerned, Thompson speaks of “more than half a century of work by numerous highly qualified scholars.”⁴ As a matter of fact, while it is true that numerous outstanding scholars were involved in the *start* of this project, the compilation of the bulky volumes that have appeared so far (the letters *kāf* and *lām*) has been the work of a single person, Manfred Ullmann of Tübingen, as far as I am aware. Thus the whole situation of the birth of this *Wörterbuch* is in a way reminiscent of Lane’s compilation of his *Lexicon*.

On p. 90 we read that manuscripts of al-Maqrīzī’s *Hiṭaṭ* were “quite rare.” This statement can hardly be true in this form. In all probability, what is meant here is that it was difficult to obtain or borrow a copy at the time. There are very many manuscripts of the *Hiṭaṭ* in existence. So much so, that their number presented itself as a problem when a new critical edition was planned and special solutions had to be found to tackle this problem. The editor, Ayman Fu’ād Sayyid, managed to locate more than 180 manuscripts, both complete and incomplete, and is thus wholly entitled to speak of “a tremendous and formidable number (*‘adad ḥā’il muḥīf*)” in this context⁵.

In connection with Bāb Zuwayla Thompson mentions that the “heavy iron gratings on the windows of the Mu’ayyad Mosque were a place of public execution for Christians and Jews” (Thompson 2010:184). It is unlikely that the story of the Jewish money-changer Thompson quotes would refer to this mosque because it is expressly stated in it that Lane “saw the wretched man hanging at a window of a public fountain which forms part of a mosque in the main street of the city” (Thompson 2010:184. Lane 2003:555). This description does not fit

³ Though see some qualifying remarks on p. 627. For another assessment, rather on the critical side and in an undeservedly severe tone, see Ullmann 2009.

⁴ Thompson 2010:691. Italics added.

⁵ See his introduction to his new edition of al-Maqrīzī, *Hiṭaṭ* I, 107*. On his editorial technique see his introductions to the various volumes.

the Mu'ayyad Mosque because it does not have a public fountain. Thompson then suggests that the execution may have been located at the Ašrafiyya Mosque because Lane himself tells us elsewhere that “[f]requently criminals are hanged against one of the grated windows of this mosque” (Lane 2000:87. Thompson 2010:185, n. 23). Now, this mosque does in fact have a public fountain with a grated window opening on the [main?] street, although we might object that in this case Lane is speaking of the windows of the mosque and not those of the public fountain. However, one might argue that since the public fountain is part of the mosque one may refer to its window as that of the mosque. We must admit that this possibility cannot be excluded. However, I think the most likely place of execution referred to in this story is the public fountain of the Zāwiya of Faraġ ibn Barqūq facing Bāb Zuwayla. The grated windows of this *sabīl* were well-known places of execution in the nineteenth century. Lane himself refers to them too when he says about Bāb Zuwayla that “before this gate, criminals are generally executed” (Lane 2000:76). In addition, the use of “main street” is more appropriate in the case of this Zāwiya. The *sabīl* has in fact *two* grated windows. In all probability, the northern window facing Bāb Zuwayla was used for execution because the aim was to achieve as great publicity as possible in order to deter people from committing crimes. This window was an “ideal” place of execution from this point of view because owing to its location in the axis of Bāb Zuwayla everybody passing along the main thoroughfare [Lane’s “main street”] of medieval Cairo in North-South direction had to face the corpse and change direction abruptly, i.e. turn left, in closest proximity. When assessing the impact a hanging corpse made upon passers-by we must not forget that in the nineteenth century the *sabīl* was much closer to Bāb Zuwayla than it is now: when Taḥt ar-Rabʿ street was widened in order to facilitate road traffic the Zāwiya was moved to its present location in 1922-23⁶. On the other hand, Bāb Zuwayla itself is also known to have been a well-known place of execution, where the last Mamlūk ruler, Ṭūmān Bāy, had also been executed after the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517. In the case of Bāb Zuwayla the persons to be executed were hanged in the dome of the passageway⁷. This appears clearly in the account of Ṭūmān Bāy’s execution in the *Badāʾiʿ az-zuhūr* of Ibn Iyās: when Ṭūmān Bāy was lifted from the ground the rope tore and he fell on the *threshold of Bāb Zuwayla* (ʿatabat Bāb Zuwayla). In fact the rope tore twice and he fell to the ground both times. So finally he was strangled. Now ʿataba (threshold) is the

⁶ Cf. as-Sayyid 1920-24:397-399. See also the enclosed plan of the area *ibid.* (*Mosquée de Farag ibn Barqouq et ses alentours. – Caire. – Plan*).

⁷ Cf. Herz 1900/1905:278. Rhoné 1910:44-45. (Rhoné maintains that Ṭūmān Bāy was hanged on the *sabīl* of the Zāwiya of Faraġ ibn Barqūq, which is not true.) Wiet [1937]: 636. Ormos 2009:449-450.

part of a door “upon which one treads,” that is the bottom of the doorway. Consequently, the hanging must have taken place in the dome of the passageway⁸.

I hear that now Jason Thompson is planning to write a similar biography of Richard Burton. I am looking forward with great interest to its publication. I wish he could be persuaded to retain his highly laudable method followed in the present work, namely the presentation of as many detailed data as possible.

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⁸ Ibn Iyās: *Badāʾiʿ* V, 172¹⁸-173¹. On ʿataba, see Amīn & Ibrāhīm 1990:80, Lane: 1863-93:1944. Webster 1957:434 “doorway”, 1519 “threshold”. Ching 1995:63 “door / sill / threshold”. Abd-El-Gawad 1985:221 (no. 1221/b; s.v. ʿataba-b).

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