Alexandria in Post-War British Literature (1950-1990)

By

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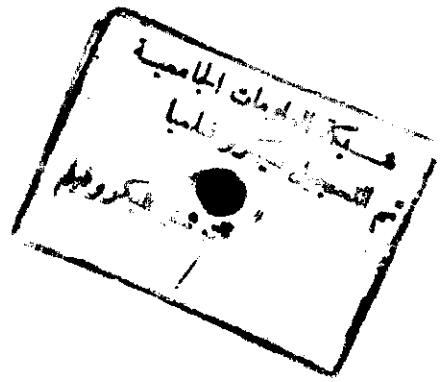

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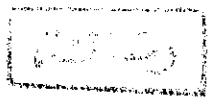

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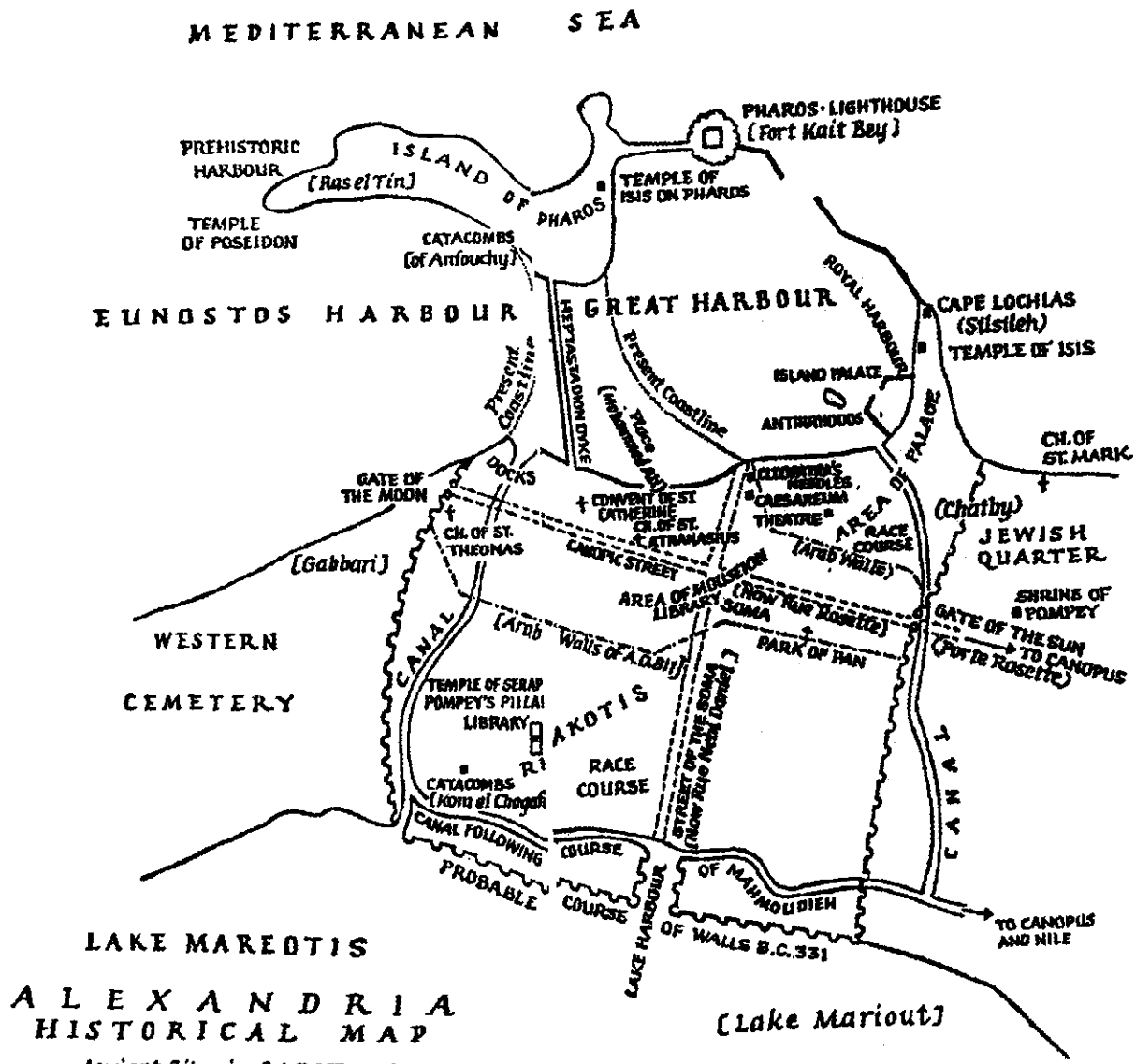

ALEXANDRIA
HISTORICAL MAP

Ancient Sites in CAPITALS
Modern Sites *bracketed* [ ]

Introduction

This thesis deals with six British writers; all of them have chosen to write about Alexandria. Their novels reveal the importance of the city for the western mind. Although these writers are alien to the city, they come to it with certain claims. They do not claim the right of birth or the right of citizenship; what they claim is the right of heritage and the right to the roots of their culture and tradition.

The roots of the west and the east converge on the soil of this ancient city and pave the road for modern mentality and modern civilization.

Said El-Nasery in his book Misr Tahta Hokm Al-Eghriq Wa Al-Roman writes that Alexandria remained under the Greek and the Roman rule for eleven centuries (323 BC - 641 AD). The importance of the period is due to its being an intermediate phase between two cultures: the Pharaonic and the Islamic (Introduction A). El-Nasery strikes the keynote for the transformation that Alexandria underwent as he refers to the first phase of the previous period which is known as the 'Hellenistic' period. In contrast to the 'Hellenic' period, which refers to Greek culture exclusively; the 'Hellenistic' period (323 BC - 30 BC) means 'Hellenic Eastern' (Introduction, C). The vitality of the flourishing Alexandrian civilization during that period, asserts El-Nasery, was not exclusively Greek or Western. It was rather the result of the interaction between the Greek spirit of freedom and democracy, and the Egyptian genius and advanced accomplishments (Introduction, B). El-Nasery explains that the Egyptian civilization was esoteric in nature. Its secrets were locked in temples and behind royal walls, for they considered their religion

and their arts as sacred and a taboo for the common people as well as for the other races. The fusion of the two cultures melted those walls as the Greek civilization penetrated those temples and adapted the Pharaohs' royal attire (Introduction A-D).

El-Nasery adds that In 323 BC Alexander the Great entered Egypt. His expedition was of a cultural nature as well as a military one. His dream was to build several cities modeled on Greek democracy and freedom. His aim was also to lay open for the Greeks the opulence and the riches of the Eastern countries. He included in his campaign scientists and researchers to study the natural resources of those countries. El-Nasery compares Alexander's expedition to that of Napoleon's, for the latter imitated Alexander's example many centuries later when he emphasized knowledge and science as well as the annexation of Egypt (18).

The cultural background of Alexander the Great extends to the Academy of Athens, which was founded by Plato and other lovers of wisdom (The Republic of Plato XXVII). In that school love and tolerance were among the main subjects of its syllabus. It taught principles such as 'It is better to suffer wrong than to do it; better to be chastised for wrong-doing than to escape punishment by the arts of the forensic orator' (The Republic XX). T.S. Dorsch in the Introduction to Classical Literary Criticism states that to those teachings of Socrates and Plato, Aristotle came at the age of seventeen and he remained in the Academy till Plato's death twenty years later (15). The next disciple in the line of those great philosophers was Alexander the Great:

> In 342 Philip of Macedon appointed him [Aristotle] tutor to his young son, later Alexander the Great. On Alexander's succession to the throne

> in 335 Aristotle returned to Athens, and was put in charge of the lyceum, a 'gymnasium' sacred to Apollo lyceus. He was a man of vast erudition; his lectures and writings covered almost every aspect of human knowledge that was studied in his day, and attracted a large number of scholars to the lyceum (Dorsch, Classical Literary Criticism 15).

El-Nasery also asserts that Alexander the Great, even before his arrival to Egypt, believed that his roots extend in its soil, because his mother had taught him that his father was the Egyptian god Ammon-ra (19). So, upon his arrival he was very careful to show his respect for the Egyptians and to treat them kindly as the rightful successor to the pharaoh kings. He also showed much respect for the Egyptian religion and customs (19). Forster in Alexandria a History and a Guide describes that encounter as follows:

> (Alexander's) next care was a visit to the temple of Ammon in the Siwan Oasis, where the priest saluted him as a god, and henceforward his Greek sympathies declined. He became an Oriental, a cosmopolitan almost, and though he fought Persia again, it was in a new spirit. He wanted to harmonize the world now, not to Hellenise it (9).

Forster reports that of all the cities that Alexander dreamed of building, Alexandria was the only one that was destined to be accomplished. Its founder died eight years later in Persia and his body was brought 'wrapped in gold and enclosed in a coffin of glass, and he was buried at the centre of Alexandria' (Forster 9). But, The fruits of such remote benevolent encounter still propagate in modern civilization to the West to the East and round the globe.

Alexandria grew after Alexander's death into a magnificent city Marlowe reports in his book The Golden Age of Alexandria the words of 'Amr ibn-al-As on 29 September 642 AD':

> 'I have taken a city of which I can but say that it contains 4000 palaces, 4000 baths, 400 cellars, 12,000 cellars of green vegetables, and 40,000 tributary Jews' (Marlowe 13).

Marlowe also reports the words of another 'rude desert warrior', or an Arab soldier, who expresses the impression that the city had on him when he first saw it:

> 'The moonlight reflected from the white marble made the city so bright that a tailor could see to thread his needle without a lamp. No one entered the city without a covering of his eyes to veil him from the glare of the plaster and marble (Marlowe, The Golden Age of Alexandria 13).'

Durrell reiterates those words in the introduction that he wrote to Forster's Alexandria a History and a Guide, and he comments with a note of nostalgia and regret for what he considers to be a lost city:

> No trace of this elaborate beauty remained to greet Forster when he stepped ashore in 1915 ... Alexandria has sunk into oblivion, and I must be forgiven for finding that the present town is depressing beyond endurance (Durrell XVIII - XIX).

Marlowe also describes the origin of what he considers to be the city's 'supreme intellectual life (14)':

> In CLASSICAL GREECE, learning and art were practically indistinguishable ... A man of learning, if he was to communicate what he knew in comprehensible terms, has to be an artist. The aim of learning was truth; the aim of artistic creation was beauty. Truth and beauty were identical in that beauty was the external manifestation of truth (Marlowe, The Golden Age of Alexandria 67).

According to Marlowe, the previous formula was transferred to Alexandria, where it found a rich soil that enabled it to flourish. Marlowe cites 'Plato's Academy, Aristotle's Lyceum, Zeno Stoa, and the school of Epicurus' as having great influence on Alexandria during the Hellenistic period. These schools flourished during the fifty years that preceded Alexander's conquests:

> As a result of these conquests, their influence, and their pupils, were distributed throughout the Hellenic world, the latter being attracted to the richer cities, and particularly to Alexandria, the patronage, the audience, the comforts, and the opportunities awaiting them there (Marlowe, The Golden Age of Alexandria 67).

This was the spirit that the humanists revived during the Renaissance, and its influence still propagates to the modern era as will be seen, with different degrees, in the works of the post-war British writers.

The pursuit of culture in Alexandria depended in the Ptolemic period on institutes that followed the example of the 'Academy'. Marlowe gives a detailed description of those institutes in his book. He cites, for example:

> The Museum ... It was dedicated to the Muses (hence the name Museum), thus

> emphasizing the classical Greek connection between learning and arts ... Scholars at the Museum came there by royal invitation, were resident there, and maintained by royal funds (Marlowe, The Golden Age of Alexandria 68).

Marlowe also cites the famous library of Alexandria as being founded during that reign:

> They were both [the Museum and the Library] under royal patronage ... The first three Ptolemics spent large sums and employed many agents in buying manuscripts ... wherever they could be found in all parts of the Hellenic world (Marlowe, The Golden Age of Alexandria 69).

The Alexandrian Library found also an example to follow in what Nicholes calls 'the oldest library' known. Nicholes writes in his book The Library of Ramses the Great that:

> Five hundred years before Christ the Greek geographer and historian, Hecataeus of Miletus, described a noble temple in Egypt containing a library, having over its entrance the motto, - 'Healing of the Soul,' Twenty years before Christ Strabo described a similar temple, though with less detail, calling it the Memnonium of Thebes (Nicholes, 10).

This torch of learning that was enkindled by the encounter of the two cultures materialized in what was considered to be one of the seven wonders of the world: the Pharos. Forster describes the Pharos as 'the greatest practical achievement of the Alexandrian mind and the outward expression of

the mathematical studies carried on in the Mouseion (Forster Alexandria a History and a Guide 18).

It is in this monumental encounter of west and east in the ancient city that modern Western civilization traces its roots, and It is this spirit of wisdom that these six twentieth century British writers came to excavate from the jaws of time.

Those writers were forced to retreat to Alexandria during the Second World War. There they lived as exiles, cut off their motherland till the end of the war. Due to their similar circumstances some of them came together and formed a literary group 'under the stimulation of these conditions a good deal of poetry emerged, some of which first appeared in the eight numbers of a magazine, edited by Durrell and Robin Feddan and printed in Cairo: Personal landscape, a magazine of Exile, 1942-45 (Spirit of Place 70).'

As post-war writers, those writers belong to the same period and they were also under the impact of the 'spirit of the same place.' They interacted with the city, imposed on it their culture at times and were absorbed in hers at other times.

Their narration is not the well contained narration of Jane Austen, for example, who lived in a familiar world governed by predictable and constant rules. Robert Liddell writes in Some Principles of Fiction about the predicament of those modern writers:

> If Jane Austen had been asked where she came from, she would at once have answered Hampshire - if Hardy had been asked, he would have answered Dorset - But many Englishmen, if asked what their *pays*, do not know what to answer ... In consequence, their life lacked depth and

> continuity ... social life is impoverished by restlessness and rootlessness - people do not live in one place for life, but are ... transient ...(Liddell 24).

That is precisely the condition that Terry Eagleton describes in his article 'The End of English':

> Modernism experiences a notorious difficulty over knowing how to narrate and this is because the world itself no longer appears to be story-shaped. For the classical bourgeois society, reality itself displayed the shape of an immanent narrative, which art had simply to represent. For modernism, linear causality, teleology will no longer let you in on the secret of things, will no longer yield the essence of the real. Such crisis of narrativity is at one with the consciousness of the colonial dispossessed, for whom linear time, with its smoothly unbroken continuities, is always, so to speak, on the side of Caesar (Eagleton 6).

Those writers had to invent their own rules, rules that might shock conventional literary critics such as F.R. Leavis:

> The typical modernist artist is in ceaseless transition from one ... capital to another, from one art-form, journal, cafe, group, coterie to the next. Moving on a newly cosmopolitan network which indifferently traversed the old nation-states and old-style cultural formations, clustered as aliens in some polyglot metropolis far from home ... All this ... constitutes a revolutionary challenge with which the ideology known as English Literature is on the whole quite unable to cope. Think of F. R. Leavis's critical reaction to it ...dismissive ... grudging .... hostile (Eagleton 4).

The fabric of the experience that those writers shared in Alexandria was totally new to them. They had to come to terms with the novelty of such experience and this could be achieved only through new mediums and new models of expression. The novelty of the experience rendered it also fresh and original, thus a fit medium for art. Rexroth writes in his essay 'Lawrence Durrell' that:

> One of the first of what has become the characteristic genre of mid-century fiction - the highbrow true-confession story, the mixture of semi-autobiography, diaristic style, interior monologue, random expostulation and prose dithyramb (Rexroth 30).

Durrell chose relativity in which the element of time is crucial to the ever changing reality. Enright, the same like his fictitious writer Perry, chose to carry a not book and a pencil and to take notes of what is happening in his surrounding. As a result his narrative is episodic, but this was what the material in hand dictated. Manning, lively, Newby and Croxford chose the documentary method. Both Manning and lively were eye witnesses to the incidents of their novels: Manning was working in the American Embassy during the Second World War (qtd. in Fattouh 1). Lively was born in Egypt in 1933 and spent her childhood there. She moved to England in 1945 (British Council Publication 1988). Lively added to the documentary realistic vein the philosophical one. Paradoxically realism in her novel taken to its extreme falls into quantum relativity and renders documentation quite futile. Newby taught in Cairo University between (1942-1946). As to Croxford, he spent his childhood in Egypt and left it after the 1952 Revolution. He found many of