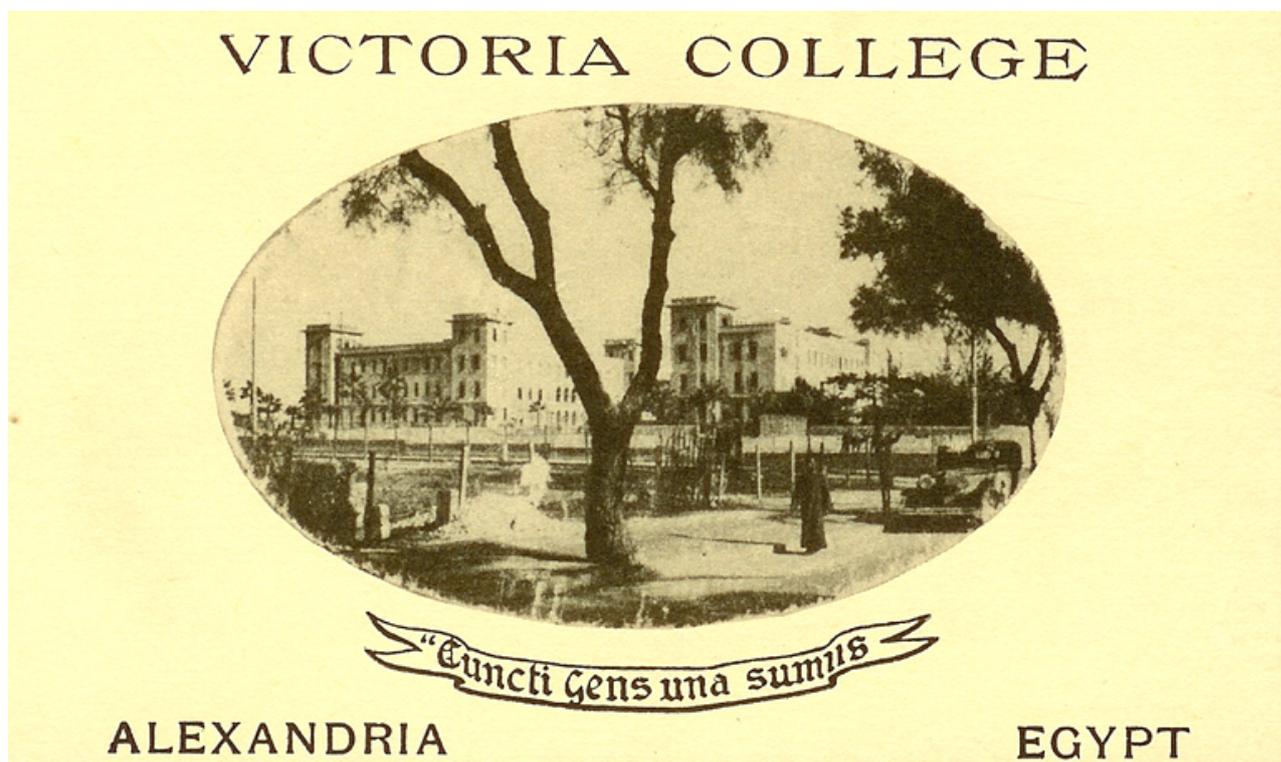


AAHA = Amicale Alexandrie Hier et Aujourd'hui

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Victoria College: A History Revealed edited by Sahar Hamouda and Colin Clement. Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2002. Pp. xii + 324, bibliography, index, illustrations, appendices. ISBN 977-424-756-6.

Here, at last, is a worthy history of Victoria College of Alexandria, which under its current name of 'Victory College,' stands out as one of the few vestigial remnants left by the British Empire in Egypt. Nationalized, along with most of the other foreign schools in the country in the aftermath of the Suez War, it survives to this day, looming above the same stately grounds and spacious playing fields now surrounded from every side by grim tenements and urban sprawl - a forlorn reminder of its former grandeur. From the moment of its foundation in October 1902 and throughout its heyday in the first half of the twentieth century, Victoria College acquired a legendary status as a unique example of Britain's supremacy not only in Egypt, but in the region as a whole. Such an achievement was all the more remarkable in that during all the years of British rule France's pre-eminence in education and culture remained second to none. Britain's reluctance to spread her own culture in Egypt was one of the most curious features of her imperial legacy. The British Council, for instance, was not founded until 1937. Only after Sir Percy Lorraine, Britain's most forceful ambassador next to Lampson, had repeatedly protested at a time when even the Italians were beginning to assert themselves that it was folly not to build on the expanding clientele created by Victoria's national repute did the Foreign Office relent and provide a small subsidy. At no time was the Council ever able to match the *rayonnement* achieved by the *Alliance Française*, let alone, compete with the art exhibits promoted by the *Atelier* or the annual tours of the *Comédie Française*. Even at the height of the war, with France eliminated and the BBC dominating the airwaves, British propaganda never found it possible to redress the balance. Until the fall of the monarchy French remained unchallenged as the *lingua franca* of the Egyptian elite.

From start to finish, the school was a mirror image of Alexandria, with which its fortunes remained inextricably intertwined until the final collapse. Its enormous

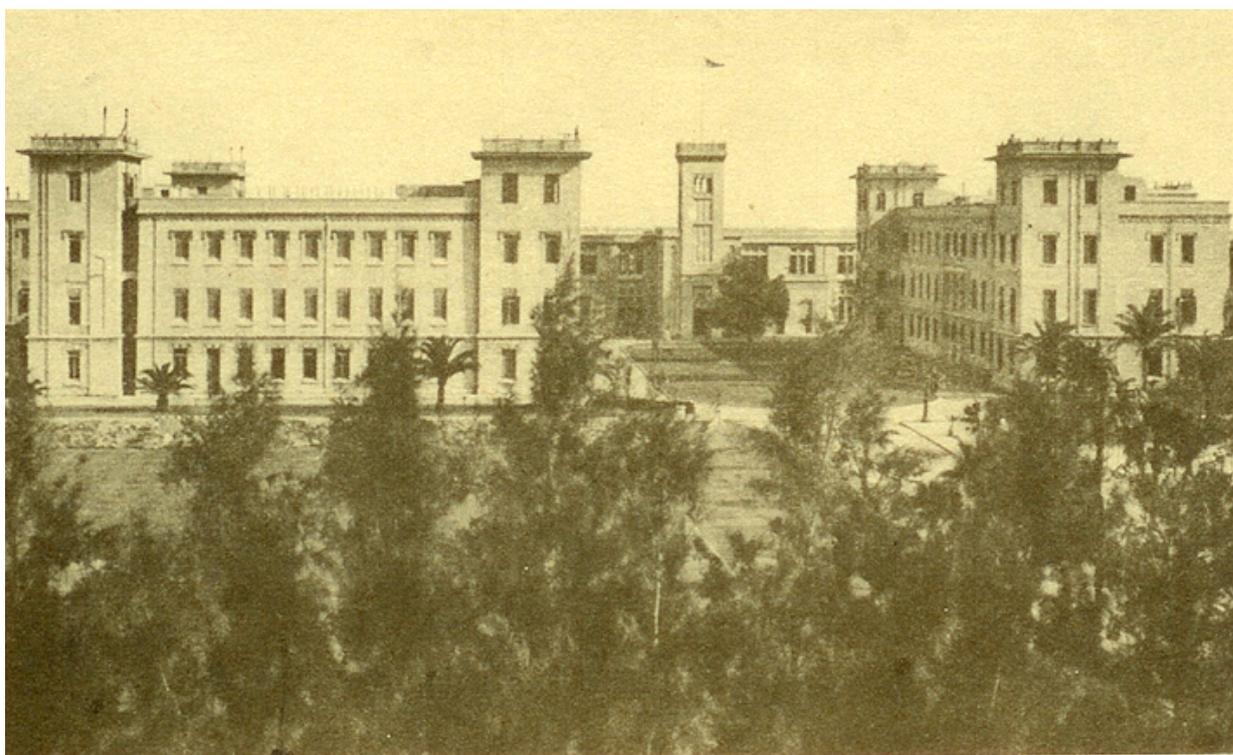
prestige, achieved almost instantaneously, also contributed to projecting that image to the Arab world beyond. It thereby helped to spread the practical ethos of a peculiar mix of a traditional English public school rooted in Alexandrian soil to other parts of Africa and the Middle East. Later on, during the Second World War, it even became a beacon of light for refugees arriving from Hitler's Europe. At the turn of the century, Alexandria was still Egypt's second capital, its major commercial center, and its principal gateway to the outside world. The city's values were secular, cosmopolitan, Levantine – in a word, Hellenistic in the broadest sense. It was regarded as the Mediterranean's most magnificent seaport, a leading shipping center linking Europe with India and the East; its docks and arsenals, its warehouses and quays, made it the most strategic naval base in all the British Empire. No wonder the Ancients had chosen to call it *Alexandria ad Aegyptum* – 'by' or 'across' from Egypt, but not 'part of it,' a hybrid of East and West. It was no accident that Alexandria was the first city in the Ottoman Empire to acquire the right to administer its own affairs, assess its own taxes and issue its own edicts. As early as 1890, its resident foreign community had taken the initiative of asserting its independence from Khedivial authority by endowing the city with a freely elected municipality entrusted with local government.¹



Victoria College from the West, ALEXANDRIA (Egypt)

It was in that same spirit that a decade later a group of enterprising local and mostly British cotton merchants and other businessmen, including G. B. Alderson, a prominent shipping magnate and founder of the Khedivial Mail Lines, and the Baron de Menasce, president of the Jewish community, resolved that the time had come to launch a school founded along British public school lines that would be able to match the best ones available abroad. The underlying aim was both altruistic and practical: to provide a first-class liberal education regardless of race or creed for the benefit of the European colony as well as the native Turkish and Arab elite. Cromer, the British agent and consul general, did not much care for education and was lukewarm when asked to endorse the project. Like Kitchener, Governor-General of the Sudan and Sirdar of the Egyptian Army, he believed that British interests would be more usefully served by promoting such institutions as Gordon College in Khartoum (the nucleus of what was to become the University of Khartoum), designed to furnish Sudanese boys as clerks and tax collectors to staff the lower rungs of the elite Sudan Political Civil Service. In Egypt, the English School in Cairo, almost exclusively recruited from British subjects such as George Blake, the Russian spy, was to be established along similar lines. Douglas Dunlop, the reactionary Scot appointed by Cromer as Advisor to the Ministry of Education, was notorious for making every effort to deny Egypt any access to Western education. Cromer was nevertheless finally persuaded by the cotton barons to lend his grudging support to their efforts on condition that the funds would be raised by private subscription. At the last moment Alderson came forward with a generous loan and the gift of a choice piece of property; the promoters then gained the sympathy of the foreign colony at large by proclaiming their intention of dedicating the fledgling college in memory of the recently departed Queen. An elegant Italianate villa specifically built for the purpose in downtown Mazarita facing the Eastern harbor, the royal harbor of the Ptolemies where Caesar's fleet had sailed within sight of the great library to restore Cleopatra to her kingdom, was selected as an agreeable site for such a pioneering enterprise. Four years later the flourishing school, with enrollments growing beyond all expectations, was moved to an even more agreeable site overlooking the road to Aboukir on the outskirts of Ramleh. It was situated on an elegant estate covering eighteen feddans of

expansive lawns and palm groves on the fringes of the city's residential suburbs around which a whole new neighbourhood named after the school was to develop; the tramway company obligingly consented to extend the Victoria line to its very gates. What was originally conceived as a bold business venture to meet local needs and circumstances was to become what some have called (not without exaggeration) 'the Eton of Egypt,' the most prestigious British public school in all the Empire.²



Victoria College from the West, ALEXANDRIA (Egypt)

The new headmaster C.R. Lias, a reputable Arabist recruited from King's College, Cambridge, presided over an entering class consisting of twenty-six boys. They were a motley crew drawn from the bewildering mosaic that constituted the Alexandrian elite of the day, only one of whom was English, a certain Edwin Harle, who hailed from the provincial Delta town of Tanta. He was to become the first in a long line of boarders coming from such distant places as Baghdad and Amman, Addis Ababa, Tripoli and Jeddah. He was also the first Victorian to go on to study in the U.S., at the University of Pennsylvania. The others, all dayboys residing within commuting distance, represented a cross section of the city's cosmopolitan

society. According to local tradition, the boys were classified according to creed as well as nationality: Mohammedan, Israelite, Christian. As the headmaster put it in his first annual report, the pupils 'were all drawn from Egyptians and various communities whose lot is cast in Egypt.' Since under Ottoman law, Syrians and Lebanese were lumped together, all four sons of Habib Antonius, a Syrian-Lebanese landowner established in Egypt, were registered under the Syrian rubric. Michael, the eldest, was the very first name to be entered in the school's ledger. The second was George of *Arab Awakening* fame, followed by his two younger brothers. Mr. Antonius obviously placed all his trust in the British. After winning all the prizes and sharing top honours with his classmate Valassopoulo, Michael went on to earn a doctorate in law in Toulouse. His brother proceeded to King's College, Cambridge, and after marrying into the family of Faris Nimr, owners of the influential Cairo daily *Al-Muqattam*, was propelled into a political and polemical career. A good many generations of Nimrs, starting with Katy Antonius's brother, Albert, who also went on to Cambridge, were to study at the school. Of the five nationalities and creeds represented by that entering class, the 'Syrians' were outnumbered only by the Jews (recorded as Israelites, in keeping with the prevailing French nomenclature), whose parents proved to be even more far-sighted and progressive in their outlook. Only two were Egyptians. Among the next batch of ten students admitted the following semester, no less than nine were Jews, including the scions of the Aghion and de Menasce families who had founded community schools that bore their names.

With the passage of time and as Victoria's reputation spread further afield this racial mix was enlarged to absorb new blood from all points of the compass. A steady stream of Syrians from the wider Syrian diaspora, stretching from Khartoum (including Edward Atiyah, his two sons, the Stambouliehs, Charles Issawi, etc.) to their enclave in Palestine (the Mustaqqims, the great landowning dynasty of the Sursocks, Richard Saffadi, Edward Said, etc.), began to find their way to the school. Well-born families from the Gulf and the Fertile Crescent competed with Libyans, Somalis, Yemenites, Ethiopians for admission. As Britain's traditional ally, the Hashemite dynasty came to regard Victoria as part of their

legacy. Both King Hussein and Iraq's Prince Regent Abdullilah (who rose to become school prefect) and at least two of Jordan's prime ministers were Old Victorians. The Saudis, with more than a dozen princes and royal advisers and assorted dignitaries, as well as a more dubious lot, such as the arms dealer Adnan Khashoggi, were not far behind. From Sudan, came the el Mahdi and el Merghani princes, Senoussis from Libya, Sabbahs from Kuwait, Jamsheed, heir to the Sultan of Zanzibar. During the war the school roster read like the *Almanach de Gotha*, with members of the Romanov, Saxe-Coburg and Glucksburg royal families and Crown Prince Zog of Albania passing through (the exiled Greek dynasty, with a mutiny on their hands, found it prudent to patronize their own community school).



A Playing Field. Victoria College, ALEXANDRIA (Egypt)

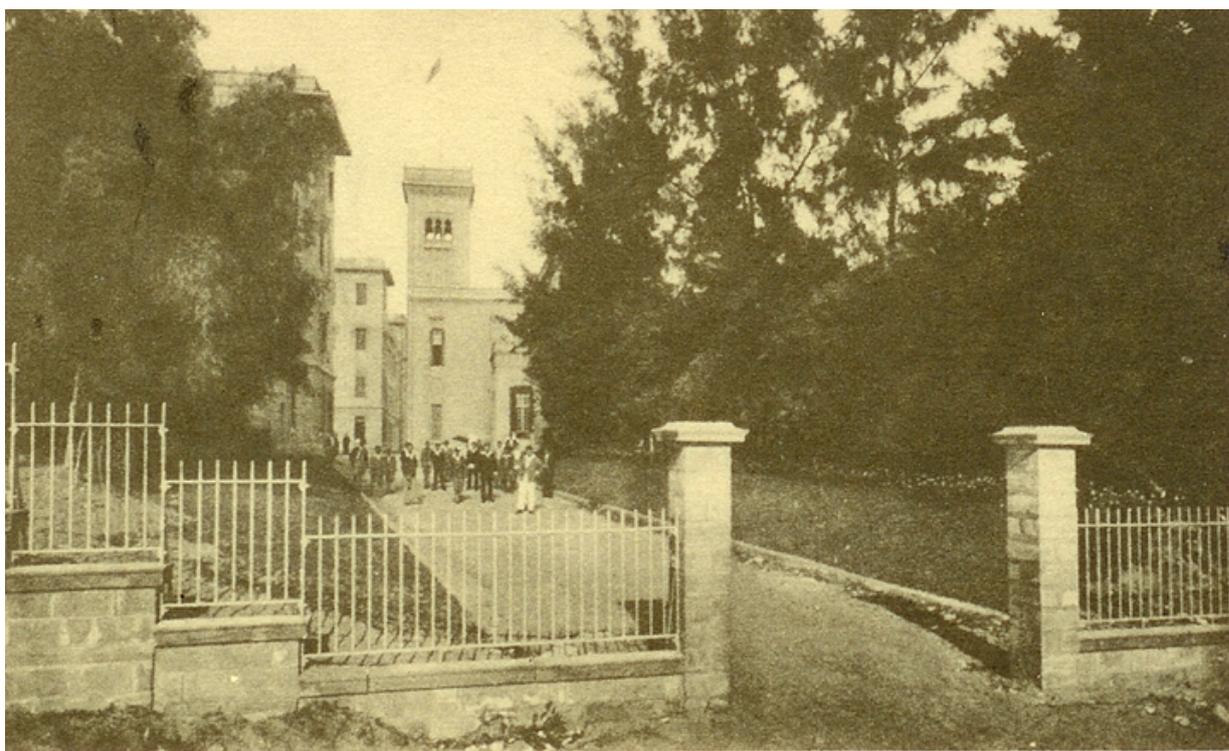
On the alphabetical ledger of the Middle School my own name appears directly above – not below – Simeon II, formerly King of Bulgaria, today its elected President. Even before this influx, the headmaster could write, in 1932, to the head of a cramming school in England that prepared boys for entrance to Oxbridge: 'The first pupil I sent you was the son of a Pasha, the second the son of a Princess and this is the son of a King, so you will think I deal exclusively with boys of very lofty connections.' And then, by way of explanation, he went on to point out, 'my school

here is very mixed socially, as the East generally is.' Of the three boys recommended, one was Egyptian, the son of Hussein Pasha Wassef, the other Hussein Fazil Chirine Bey, a Circassian, the third, 'an Iraqi of pure Arab blood descended from the Prophet.' There is no trace of any such snobbery in the collective memory of Old Victorians. The Old Boys' Association has admittedly become so prestigious in certain circles that some ambitious outsiders have been known to covet admission. As a special favour to King Hussein, its former president, the deposed King of Greece was granted honorary membership after losing his throne; the disreputable owner of Harrods, despite the fabrication of bogus Victorian credentials, has been rigorously excluded.

The school's *raison d'être*, however, remained rooted in the needs of colonial Alexandria, and continued to reflect its social composition in all its astonishing diversity, as it did at the outset. With the exception of the Carvers of field marshal fame, the British founding fathers tended to stay aloof. They preferred, like their counterparts in India, to send their sons to England. On the other hand, Victoria was highly prized by the Toussouns, the Yeghens and other members of the royal family and the Turko-Circassian aristocracy. After some initial resistance out of loyalty and deference to the French, the Egyptian elite of pashas and beys was soon seduced by a life style so much more flexible than the one it had reluctantly endured in the Lycees or at the hands of the Jesuits. The Greek novelist Ilios Yannakakis, himself the product of a French education, spoke for many whose parents had also gambled on picking the winning ticket, when he wrote, 'On enviait presque les élèves de la Victoria School, avec leur uniforme de collegiens anglais; avaient-ils tiré le bon numéro pour l'avenir?' The school's most loyal patrons were, in fact, drawn from his own milieu, from the bourgeois elites in the Greek, and more particularly the Jewish communities, who regarded Victoria as more prestigious than their own communal schools. Many generations of Basilis and Zervudachis, of Rallis and Salvagos; of Goars and Aghions, of Smouhas, Hararis and Rolos, continued to study there until well into the fifties.

But Victoria was not only reserved for patricians. Its egalitarian ethic made it open to all who could afford its reasonable fees. For others it was also an instrument of

social mobility. Mohammed Farghaly (a Muslim) and George Cordahi (a Christian) came from the middle class. Starting as a broker in the cotton exchange of Minet el Bassal, Farghaly Pasha rose to become known as 'le roi du coton,' the first Egyptian who succeeded in undermining the export monopoly of the Greek cotton merchants – the Alexandrian counterpart of Talaat Harb, the Cairo banking magnate. Cordahi was known as 'le roi de la bourse.' Both sent their two sons to Victoria. Business and trade were not the only avenues for advancement. Another



Victoria College. Entrance from the Tram Station, ALEXANDRIA (Egypt)

contemporary example is illustrated by the career of Mahmud el Falaky, whose dedication to public service represents yet another facet of the educational opportunities offered by Victoria. His grandfather, also called Mahmud el Falaky – which means the astronomer – was the author of a celebrated *Mémoire sur l'Antique Alexandrie*, still the most authoritative guide to the Ptolemaic city. After proceeding to Cambridge, Falaky went on to play a major role in Egypt's financial life, performing yeoman's service in renegotiating the British debt at Bretton Woods and remained permanent secretary of the Egyptian Finance ministry until the Free Officers' coup. Charles Issawi, the Princeton historian, who after earning an honours degree from Oxford, served his apprenticeship in Egyptian government

service, is another example in point. Equally significant as a measure of the students' versatility is the local fame achieved by George Valassopoulos. After studying in Cambridge and Toulouse and displaying a mastery of all of Alexandria's languages, he decided to embark on a literary career, earning the esteem of E.M. Forster as Cavafy's first and most talented translator.³

Most of Victoria's students proceeded to England or France, sometimes to Italy or Switzerland, for their advanced degrees. The attraction of the US, which was always frowned upon by the masters, came only later, in the early fifties. The school curriculum provided a solid grounding for careers in business or the liberal professions. The boys sat for the Oxford & Cambridge Joint Board Lower and Higher School Certificates, which virtually assured entrance to these universities, and were regarded as more rigorous than the lowly London University Matriculation offered by the other British schools in Egypt. They were equally well prepared to sit for the French *Baccalauréat* or Egyptian school certificate. Arabic was compulsory and could even be offered in lieu of Latin to satisfy the classical language requirement. A cacophony of French and Greek, Italian and Armenian, would often be heard outside the classroom. Although French reigned supreme as the second language of instruction, something had gone seriously amiss when it was allegedly reported in the late fifties that a boy when asked to conjugate '*être malade*,' replied: '*je suis malade, tu es talade, il est salade*.' Although everything was run along British public school lines (visiting English dignitaries claimed it resembled Arnold's Rugby rather than Eton), with soccer and cricket, housemasters and caning, prefects, tuck shops, matrons, Speech Days, Sports Days, and all the rest – although fagging was never countenanced - the ambience remained distinctly Alexandrian in a way that never ceased to perplex the English observer. Nowhere is this more vividly illustrated than in those tram rides along the Victoria line so nostalgically described in E. M. Forster's guide to Alexandria. These daily journeys to and from school provided a rare opportunity for bonding with one's classmates. Joking and jesting together as the bullies took a swipe at the sissies, exchanging tips on that day's algebra homework, puffing away at a cigarette clandestinely procured from Bandas, the Greek 'bakal' or grocer at the Victoria terminus, or

jumping off the moving tram before it came to a halt – all of this formed an integral part of their schooling. The high spirits and bonhomie displayed on such occasions is evoked in one of the many telling anecdotes recounted in this book. At a reunion of the London chapter of the Old Victorians, Abdel Fatah Loutfi, formerly captain of the cricket XI, ran into King Hussein, who warmly hailed him as ‘Captain Loutfi.’ ‘But you are a King,’ retorted Loutfi. To which Hussein’s reply was: ‘But you were my captain.’



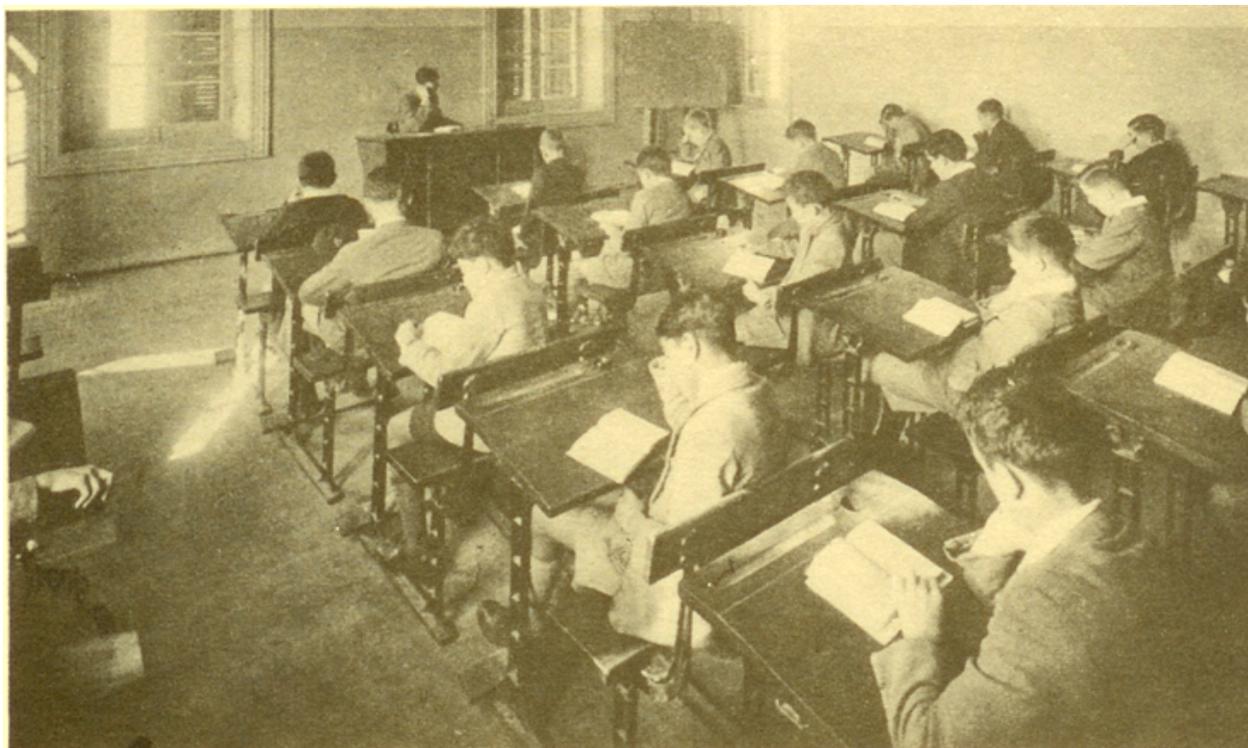
A View of the Quadrangle. Victoria College, ALEXANDRIA (Egypt)

On matters of politics and religion, the school’s position remained strictly impartial. This was dictated as much by local conditions as by the tact and discrimination of a remarkable succession of headmasters who never forgot that they represented a foreign presence in a country under occupation. Almost all the foreign schools in Egypt were missionary schools run along confessional lines. Victoria’s only serious rival, the *Lycée Français*, was itself the spearhead of the avowedly anti-clerical *Mission Laïque*, which conceived its mission as spreading the dogmas of Republican secularism and propagated them with the same crusading zeal shown by its Jesuit opponents. Victoria was also dedicated to upholding secularism, but of a gentler

and more tolerant kind. The challenge it confronted was how to impart a superior liberal education to students belonging to no less than twenty-two different nationalities who came from such a heterogeneous and polyglot background without running against any local prejudice or upsetting traditional beliefs. The British public school system resting on principles laid down by Arnold of Rugby, repeatedly tried and tested around countless playing fields that so clearly distinguished English schools from others in Europe, had been found by Victoria's first headmaster to be admirably suited to accomplish such a goal. Soccer and cricket offered a more practical way for shaping character and creating self-reliance than Cartesian logic or Corneillian declamations. In the Alexandrian milieu, only the spirit of loyalty and fair play fostered by games and inter-House rivalries could replace any lingering trace of religious or ethnic identity. One of the first casualties of the rise of nationalism and of sectarian self-assertion would become the school's integrity as a pillar of toleration, whether religious or racial. The tide had obviously started to turn by 1953 when a delegation of parents from Saudi Arabia – now a growing source of Victoria's clientele – paid a visit to the school and defiantly demanded that a room be set aside for their boys' daily prayers, or better still, that a mosque be erected at their expense on the college grounds. The College, replied the headmaster, could never sanction such an affront to its independence. No such resistance would any longer be possible after Suez.

The turning point had already been reached a few years earlier - in 1946, with the assassination of Sir Amin Osman Pasha on secret orders from Anwar Sadat, the first in a string of political assassinations that was to lead to the fall of the monarchy. A protégé of Victoria's most outstanding headmaster, R.W.G. Reed, Osman was the best-known Egyptian statesman turned out by the school and had long stood out as a voice of moderation in national politics. A very talented man with law degrees from Oxford and Paris, he was a noted cricketer who taught Arabic translation at the College in his spare time as Under Secretary, then Minister of Finance. The fatal flaw was his attachment to England. He had played a leading part in negotiating the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936 and had acted as mediator between Lampson (now Lord Killearn), the Wafd and the King in the

abdication crisis of 1942 that brought Nahas to power. He was shot on his way to the Old Victorians' Club on Sharia Adly in Cairo. His classmate Farghaly, Lord Killlearn, Nahas and their wives were by his bedside at the end.



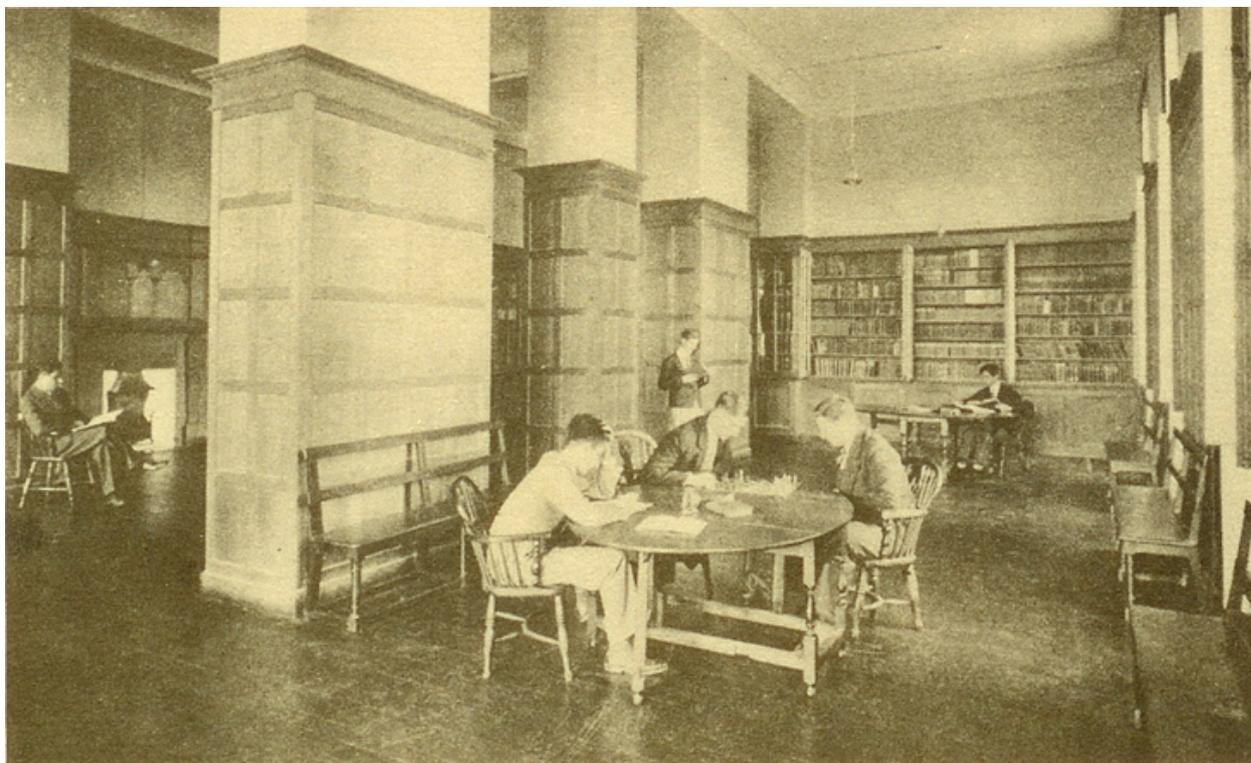
A Class Room. Victoria College, ALEXANDRIA (Egypt)

All this, and much else besides, is recounted in this admirable book written to celebrate Victoria's centennial. Should it be greeted as a chronicle or an obituary? Fittingly it is both. Its principal authors, Sahar Hamouda, a professor of English at the University of Alexandria, and Colin Clement, a former teacher at the school, and their able team, have consulted a wide range of sources to recreate with a meticulous attention to detail the departed glory of an institution which has no parallel in the Middle East or anywhere else. It is a beguiling tale, thoroughly documented and superbly told, saturated with fascinating lore and colourful anecdotes which bring alive the spirit of the school and its wide-ranging impact. The figure of R.W.G. Reed, its legendary headmaster, who in his lifetime was reputed to be Britain's *eminence grise* in the region, is vividly recaptured in an incisive chapter by Professor Hamouda. The book can also be read for its rare glimpses into the subtle and ambiguous inter-actions between the school and the

city of its birth, showing how the decision to create a Cairo branch during the Second World War contributed to severing the links that had long served to nurture and sustain it. Among the numerous appendices, many of them drawn from primary sources, is an essay by Mohammed Awad, also a professor at the University of Alexandria, which sheds new light on the neglected subject of Victoria's architecture. E.M Forster implies that its 'huge buildings,' sneeringly and cursorily dismissed in his *Guide*, were of British inspiration, whereas it is demonstrated here that they were, in fact, conceived by local architects along independent conceptual lines owing nothing to British precedent. Combining in a bold and refreshing way neo-Islamic themes with modernism, the school's profile with its distinctive ensemble of Moorish-style arcades and medieval towers stands out to this day as a city landmark. Only the library with its oak wood columns and paneled walls has, appropriately enough, an English air to it. Forster, who served as a Red Cross orderly at Victoria when it was converted into a military hospital during the War, was too enraptured by the attractions of Egyptian tram conductors to conceal his disdain for anything that smacked of Britain's imperial domination.

A book such as this invites us to reflect on the benign and vivifying effect that a British school could have in shaping the mind and character of local elites in one of the outposts of Empire before it collided with history. In those tranquil days when national allegiance was still a fluid and indeterminate concept and religious identity a matter of relative indifference, a mild and unobtrusive colonial presence made it possible for Victoria to create an ideal climate for encouraging free inquiry and personal responsibility and provide a breeding ground for talent and leadership. It is interesting to note that three of the most damning indictments of British colonial rule, Edward Atiyah's (*An Arab Tells His Story*, dedicated to two of Victoria's headmasters), George Antonius' (*Arab Awakening*) and Edward Said's (*Orientalism*), were all written by Old Victorians. It is no less significant that, with the exception of Said, who attended the Cairo branch (from which he was expelled), the other two remained unflinching in their loyalty to their school. Both of Atiyah's sons followed him to Victoria, then to Oxford, and one of them, the mathematician Sir Michael Atiyah, became president of the Royal Society.

When in 1920 the Milner Mission arrived in Egypt at the peak of the nationalist agitation to consider the Wafd's demands for independence, Lord Milner found the time to pay a visit to the school and mingle with the pupils. Edward Atiyah was the co-author of a play on William Wallace that was performed to welcome the British Government's representative. George Antonius, along with Valassopoulo and two of their former schoolmates, decided to mark the occasion by greeting Milner with a petition, which was circulated in the local press. In the midst of the 'exigencies of time' and the national boycott and widespread turmoil that confronted the Colonial Secretary, the petition proudly drew attention to their alma mater's achievement 'to bring up the sons of this country on principles of duty, character and clean living' as an example to be followed by the rest of Egypt. Even Cromer stood redeemed, in more ways than one, as the petitioners concluded their appeal to protect Victoria's standing in the times that lay ahead by invoking Cromer's vision of 'an institution worthy of the great Sovereign whose name it bears' - an interesting commentary on the relationship between pedagogy and politics so well illustrated in this book.



The Library. Victoria College, ALEXANDRIA (Egypt)

About the author

Alain Silvera is Professor Emeritus of History at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania. Born and raised in Alexandria, he was educated at Victoria College, then at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris and at Harvard, where he received his Ph.D. in 1963. A veteran of the Korean War, he also served in US intelligence during the Algerian War. His academic interests, ranging from modern French intellectual history to the impact of the West in the Middle East, is revealed in his publications, which include 'Daniel Halévy and His Times' and 'The End of the Notables' and various studies on the Eastern Question in the nineteenth century, the impact of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, Muhammad Ali's educational reforms and the evolution of the Jews of Egypt. He has contributed to many learned journals and is the co-editor of 'The Encyclopedia of Revolutions' and other historical publications.

All the photos were taken in the 1930s and have been provided by Robert Yazgi (VC Alex.-1947).



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¹ Gabriel Baer, Studies in the Social History of Modern Egypt, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 192-202.

² P.J. Rich, Elixir of Empire: The English Public Schools, Ritualism, Freemasonry and Imperialism (London: Regency Press, 1989), pp. 16, 44.

³ (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Jane Lagoudis Pinchin, Alexandria Still: Forster, Durrell, and Cavafy Press, 1977), pp. 211-13.