



The Englishwoman in Egypt

Sophia Poole

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First published in 1844, *The Englishwoman in Egypt* is the collected observations of Sophia Poole, who lived in Cairo from 1842 until 1849 with her brother, the well known Orientalist Edward Lane, and her two children. During her residence, Poole learned Arabic and adopted Egyptian clothing that enabled her not only to observe day-to-day life in the streets and markets but also to enter hammams and harems and interact on an intimate level with Egyptian women of different classes. Poole ultimately had access, in fact, to the highest levels of society, including the family of the viceroy Mohamed Ali Pasha, and recorded her experiences there with the same eye for detail and understanding of underlying customs as she brought to bear in the marketplace. She moves effortlessly from situation to situation—the pasha's daughter smoking her jewel-encrusted pipe, the homesick slave-girl, the occupation of ladies of leisure—one scene after another is unfolded in her writing that reveals not only a mind that observes and records but a human being who attempts to feel and understand a different culture.

In contrast to her brother's dense works of research, Sophia Poole's was cast in the form of letters to a friend. These letters cover her arrival in Alexandria and trip up the Nile to Cairo, as well as her life in Cairo, with its visits to surrounding villages. *The Englishwoman in Egypt* is at once entertaining and informative. If Edward Lane kept alive for posterity a post-medieval Cairo that has since disappeared, then his sister in her work no doubt complemented that great achievement by presenting the same world from a feminine perspective that he as a man could not have access to.

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