

an honorary attaché as he made a trip around South East Asia in a vain attempt to mediate in Indonesia's confrontation with Malaysia. I was the only member of the God King's entourage who did not have to fall to his knees when speaking to him. The day after the embassy was sacked I was standing in the ruins staring disconsolately at the upturned wreckage of my new Ford Zephyr when a large black limousine drew up and an envoy

from the Palace emerged bearing a shiny parcel addressed to me. Inside was a lavish gift of Cambodian silverware and a handwritten note in exquisite French from Monseigneur (as Sihanouk always insisted on being addressed), thanking me fulsomely for my help during his recent tour – but never a mention of the events of the previous day. How typical of the man!

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GERALD BUTT

CAIRENE COURTSHIP

PLAYING CARDS IN CAIRO: MINT TEA,
TARNEEB AND TALES OF THE CITY

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By Hugh Miles
(Abacus 279pp £10.99)

CAIRO IS NOT a city that allows you to be indifferent to it. The Egyptian capital assaults all your senses, day and night. It is incredibly noisy, dirty and chaotic. Fabulous wealth exists side-by-side with abject poverty. During a recent visit to Cairo I found myself stuck in a traffic jam. My taxi, like the battered assembly of cars, minibuses and trucks packed around it, inched forward, and dark exhaust fumes wafted upwards with each touch of the accelerator. As we progressed slowly towards Cairo University I had plenty of time to study a large advertising board attached to a building at the end of the street. The advertisement was for one of the latest models from Mercedes-Benz. 'Make It Yours Today', said the slogan. Viewed from the chaos and paralysis of the Cairo street, that slogan, in English only, seemed to be addressing people on another planet.

Yet despite the contradictions, as many visitors end up loving Cairo as hating it. Hugh Miles falls squarely into the first category. Having visited briefly at the age of seventeen, he returned ten years later for a stay of a few weeks in Zamalek, the island in the Nile favoured by rich Egyptians and foreigners, throwing himself with gusto into expatriate nightlife. Just before leaving he met Roda, a doctor and an Egyptian beauty with 'coal-black hair and coppery skin'.

After such an exotic encounter it was perhaps not surprising that the cloud-covered streets of Hammersmith seemed dull compared to those of Cairo. So he returned to Egypt to try his hand as a freelance journalist and meet up again with Roda. The central story of the book is his slow and careful courtship of Roda, over frequent games of cards in the company of a group of young, middle-class Egyptian women.

These encounters gave the author, rapidly becoming fluent in Arabic, insight into the lives of women in a city

where conservative attitudes remain and the Islamic influence on society is increasing. With fathers and brothers determined to prevent unchaperoned meetings with men, Miles observed how the Cairo girls had to become practised liars and mistresses of intrigue in order to enjoy some freedom. He also learned from his card-playing companions about subjects that are rarely discussed in Western reporting on the Middle East, such as divorce, honour killings, and hymen replacement surgery.

These valuable snapshots of women's lives in Cairo are interspersed with the author's observations on broader aspects of Egyptian life, not least the problem of official corruption, the abuse of human rights, poverty, unemployment and the rising popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood. He also provides little snippets of history, which are not always precise. For example, he says (correctly) that the humiliating defeat of the Arabs in the June 1967 Six Day War with Israel shattered the vision of pan-Arab unity that President Nasser had created; but he also claims that the war revealed at the same time the ugly truth of 'secret prisons, torture, failed economic policies, political unaccountability, corruption'. In fact, Egyptians were well aware of these failings years before the Six Day War. What is remarkable is that Nasser's charisma was such that he still won overwhelming popular support, despite his repressive policies. An elderly Egyptian writer told me that he cried when he heard that Nasser had died. I asked if he joined the millions on the streets of Cairo for the funeral procession. 'No,' he replied. 'Nasser had put me in prison.'

The strongest aspects of *Playing Cards in Cairo* are the descriptions of Cairo life – and the tussle between tradition and modernity. The weakness of the book is its narrative thread – the courtship of Roda and the author's conversion to Islam in order to marry her. Embracing a new religion, and giving yourself a new Islamic name, are huge steps, even if they are taken only for the convenience of marriage. They need more discussion and explanation than they are given here. Furthermore, the reconstructed dialogue is often trite and unconvincing. One puts the book down with the feeling that Hugh Miles, with his immersion into Egyptian life, is well placed to write a serious study of the country – but *Playing Cards in Cairo* falls short of the mark in this respect.

To order this book at £8.79, see LR Bookshop on page 22