
A full-scale biography of the orientalist Edward William Lane has long been overdue. In 1877 Stanley Lane-Poole appended a Life to the fifth volume of the Arabic-English Lexicon, but with its mere 25,000 words—and most of it copied from Lane’s diary of his second trip to Egypt—it was little more than an impersonal sketch of the great Arabist’s life. The first modern biographical assessment came a century later with Leila Ahmed’s Edward W. Lane. A Study of his life and works and of British ideas of the Middle East in the nineteenth century (1978). Ahmed was the first to use the unpublished letters by Lane to his friend and fellow Egyptologist Robert Hay written during the period from 1828 to 1850, and in her preface she promises “delightful insights into his personality, his ways, and his interests.” Regrettably, her text hardly brings this out: there is near to nothing about Lane’s early life and very little about his last twenty years. Lane’s personality remained as inscrutable as before. Ahmed’s book, as the subtitle indicates, is more a study in cultural history than in biography.

Jason Thompson’s massive new biography promises to fill the gaps in Lane’s life. For his work he was able to draw on a number of important archival sources that were not available to earlier writers. These include an important collection of field books, sketchbooks, letters, and manuscript drafts that had long lain uncatalogued and unused at the Griffith Institute in Oxford. Thompson was also the first to use Sir Gardner Wilkinson’s huge collection of personal papers at the Bodleian Library, as well as the collections of Joseph Bonomi’s writings, Lane’s close friend for most of his professional career.

Thompson describes his work on Lane as both “narrative biography” and “collective biography.” In fact, this book is very much a collective history of Joseph Bonomi, Robert Hay, and John Gardner Wilkinson, to mention only a few of Lane’s friends and fellow Egyptologists. The book is also a fine cultural history of how Egypt was perceived by Lane and other orientalists, and how it was interpreted by them for the early-Victorian English reading public. Thompson also succeeds well in tracing the chronology of Lane’s movements during his three long sojourns in Egypt—first from 1825 to 1828, then from 1833 to 1835, and finally from 1842 to 1849—and the reader sees through Lane’s eyes how at the end of the first half of the nineteenth century the country changed, how its society slowly began to be modernized, and how, as a result, much of old Cairo was defaced. Thompson also shows the reader how Lane
witnessed the process by which many of Egypt’s ancient monuments were irretrievably plundered and devastated during the nineteenth-century heyday of Egyptology.

In reconstructing the story of Lane’s life during these sojourns Thompson heavily relies on, and extensively quotes from, the information that can be found in Lane’s Description of Egypt (published and edited by Thompson for the first time in 2000), his Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians, and his sister’s Englishwoman in Egypt. These passages are interspersed with personal comments from Hay’s diaries and from the extant letters Lane wrote to friends such as Hay and Bonomi. This approach works very well, as Lane was an excellent observer and describer—it has often been remarked, for example, that his Modern Egyptians is above all a “visual book”—and Thompson ably interweaves Lane’s “pictures” with wider historical evidence of what Egypt looked like during the early-Victorian period. “The clack of board games in the coffee houses,” Thompson writes, “the smell of spice in the bazaar, the splash of rose water from a passing funeral procession—all are present in Modern Egyptians, relieving the tedium of detailed description by turning it into sensory perception so compelling that the reader sits with Lane on the mastaba in front of Sheikh Ahmad’s shop and watches the world go by” (p. 328). Much the same could be said of Thompson’s biography. Cairo and Egypt fully come to life as Lane’s movements in the capital and his voyages to Upper Egypt are unravelled.

This however tends to make Lane’s Egypt the central theme of this biography and remove the man himself from the centre of the book. One can easily see why this happens. About a third through the book Thompson starts reminding the reader with a certain insistence that in later life Lane destroyed much of his correspondence, that hardly any of the letters to his family in which he expressed himself unreservedly about many topics have survived (p. 242), that Lane surrounded his personal life with impenetrable discretion (p. 458), and that especially the last 25 years of Lane’s life are hazy because of a lack of evidence and because of a monotonous life-style and working routine in which the distinctions between days, weeks, months, and even years, are blurred (p. 644). “The biographer’s task,” Thompson apologizes, “is like reconstructing a mosaic where most of the tesserae have been shattered or lost, trying to put the remaining pieces in their right relationship so some of the overall patterns will appear” (p. 72). But which are these overall patterns?

Edward Said has unkindly called Lane a mock participant in Egyptian society, a European who appeared to be an Oriental yet always retained his scholarly detachment. To Said Lane’s persona is “both an Oriental masquerade and an