

DEATH AT DENSHAWAI:
A CASE STUDY IN THE HISTORY OF BRITISH
IMPERIALISM IN EGYPT

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE CAPSTONE

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In 1906, five British officers went on a pigeon hunt in a small village in the Western Delta area of the Nile River called Denshawai. The officer in charge, a Major Pine-Coffin, had been there before without incident. This time, however the villagers became incensed. A fire broke out at a threshing floor in the village, and the locals accused the officers of starting it. The locals became aggressive towards them, and seized one of the officer's guns. The gun went off during the struggle, injuring four villagers. At this point the violence increased, and in the aftermath one officer was killed and another severely injured.

Lord Cromer, governor of British Egypt, decided to use this incident as a way of teaching the locals to respect British authority and teach the fellaheen (Egyptian peasants) a lesson. The police arrested over fifty of the villagers, charged them with murder, and tried them not under the reformed court systems established by the

British, but under a little-used tribunal from twenty years earlier. The investigation, trial and punishments were finished within three weeks of the attack. Four villagers were hanged, and another twenty punished.

This was the impetus Egyptian nationalists needed – within a year, seven political parties had formed with the explicit goal of eliminating British rule. Before Denshawai, the urban Egyptians looked down on the fellaheen, and Coptics and Muslims distrusted each other. From this point under the elimination of British rule in 1952, much of Egypt was united against them.

Many viewed the trial of the Denshawai fellaheen as a sham. But why? In thirty years of rule, British authorities and the English press in Egypt developed very biased opinions about the rural peasants, and this colored every aspect of Denshawai. In my review of the trial, I believe the way the evidence was collected, the trial conducted, and the lawyers' arguments on both sides were conducted based on the stereotypes established as "fact" by British authorities. This paper will show the fellaheen stereotypes, documented in memoirs written by British administrators, starting with Lord Cromer, and his subordinates. Once I have done that, I will then prove Cromer had a very strong influence over the major English-language newspaper in Egypt at that time, *The Egyptian Gazette*.

With both the press and administrators shaded with anti-fellaheen biases, I then take a closer look at the investigation of the Denshawai Incident: how evidence was collected, interviews conducted, and witnesses treated, all while focusing on how this was done while the authorities had a preconceived notion about the locals. Finally, at the trial, lawyers for both the state and defendants used these biases in an

effort to win the case. The prosecuting attorney, an urban Egyptian, used these biases to try and convince the five-man tribunal to convict all fifty-one arrested to be sentenced to death, while the defense attorneys used those same stereotypes to argue for their innocence. On top of that, one of the defense attorneys used the view the British had of themselves as “just civilizers” to argue for their release, even after admitting their guilt.

On the 13th of June 1906, in a small village along the western edge of the Nile Delta, five British officers were attacked during a pigeon-hunting excursion. One of the officers died as a result, and the colonial government's response was quick and retaliatory. Within fifteen days over fifty villagers were arrested, tried before a tribunal and sentenced to punishments without hope of appeal. Twenty-one were found guilty, of whom four were hanged and seven flogged. The others received prison sentences of varying lengths.

But the Denshawai Incident was more than the trial of local aggressors. Instead, it was a trial of the "Oriental" stereotype the English developed of the fellaheen, or Egyptian peasant, over the nineteenth century. Through witness interviews, the manner of investigation and conduct of the trial, it becomes obvious that the defendants didn't matter: what was on trial was the image of the Oriental Man. Depicting him as uncivilized, shifty, and unable to tell the truth, this stereotype was placed upon the fifty-two arrested villagers. The English played a contrasting role – fair and civilized, they were on a God-given mission to bring civilization and justice to Egypt, and Orientals could only understand force and harsh punishment.

How were these stereotypes created? In his influential book *Orientalism*, Edward Said argued that stereotypes about the East began as far back as the Greeks, but gained a more "scientific" edge following the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt in 1798. This paper shows how the descriptions of the Egyptian peasants changed from this point forward. Early in the 1800s, the typical Egyptian was judged as being "different" than the English, but as Britain became more involved in the

political affairs of Egypt following its bankruptcy in the 1870s, those images changed and grew more negative. During the time Evelyn Baring (later Lord Cromer) was Consul-General of Egypt from 1883-1907, these stereotypes were written into governmental policy. While there were some outspoken advocates for Egypt, such as Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, they were generally ignored until after the Denshawai Incident. In the year following the incident, more and more questions surfaced concerning the elements of the investigation behind Denshawai. Why were the British officers granted immunity, when some of their accounts seemed contradictory? How were a number of fellaheen convicted of premeditated murder when no evidence was given as proof? Why were the arrested tried under a little-used Khedival Decree rather than the recently reformed justice system? Finally, why did the defense attorneys fail to use to their advantage any of the weaknesses in the government's case? In my opinion, answers to these questions have to do with the stereotypes of the fellaheen.

Edward Said argued that Western descriptions of the Orient were not based in reality, but rather in a view of the East as being "different" than Europe. This image of the Orient and the Middle East, he argued, defined the self-image of the West (more specifically, Britain, France and the United States) better than the actual people and places supposedly characterized by those traits. (Said, 12) Said pointed out the image of the exotic Orient dates back as far as the ancient Greeks, but the modern Orientalism dates to the Napoleonic Expedition to Egypt in 1798. Napoleon brought with him over a hundred scientists intent on investigating and discovering Egypt for Europe. In doing so, they created the modern version of Orientalism. Said

says, "...The sheer power of having described the Orient in modern Occidental terms lifts the Orient from the realms of silent obscurity where it has lain neglected (except for the inchoate murmurings of a vast but undefined sense of its own past) into the clarity of modern European science." (Said, 86) In turn, the "scientific" studies of Egypt reinforced the pre-existing images of the Orient and its citizens.

Before Orientalism and politics could become unified in the latter half of the nineteenth century however, the exotic image of the Egyptian peasants underwent change. Early passages tended to be more sympathetic towards their plight. Generally, the fellaheen were viewed as being suppressed by centuries of despotic rule, forced to be accept their situation. In an 1826 *Westminster Review* article written by Francis Place, the common Egyptian was viewed with a compassion for their position: "...a conscription was made of the felhas, or peasantry settled in the villages along the banks of the Nile, a race of men distinguished from the roving Bedouins by their quiet submission to whomsoever governed the country." Place then expands upon this a few pages later.

The felhas are of a dark brown complexion, approaching the copper colour; they are stout, well-formed, active men, lively and hardy, all excellent qualities in soldiers; add to which, that the subjection in which they have been brought up, renders them obedient and submissive to the discipline, such as it is, of the pacha's army. As might be expected, the non-commissioned officers have but little influence over the men. When roused to make a show of insurrection against their oppressors, their courage has always been estimated very low, and it will probably be found, should they ever be opposed to a regularly-disciplined army, that it has not yet been very much elevated. (Place, 185-7)

Here, their submissiveness was discussed as a detriment to serving in Mohamed Ali's army, but the fellaheen were not vilified as they would be fifty years

later. In fact, the article takes on a benign, commiserating tone. The peasants were under the oppressive rule of the Mamelukes, the Turks, protected in their sorrowful existence from marauding Bedouins. They lived in “the lowest possible state of wretchedness”, had no confidence in their own abilities, were depressed, and would never attempt to upend the crushing taxes and conscription enforced upon them because of the severity of punishments from past attempts. (Place, 192-3)

Edward William Lane was another Orientalist in the early nineteenth century with whom Said took issue. Said called him a “scholar and a gifted enthusiast” who “intends to use his residence for the specific task of providing professional Orientalism with scientific material”. This, however, is corrupted because the “Orient is **for** the European observer, and what is more, in the category that contains Lane’s Egyptians, the Orientalist ego is very much in evidence, however much his style tries for impartial impersonality” (Said, 157-8). While Said called it an “encyclopedia of exotic display and a playground for orientalist scrutiny” (Thompson, 579), the observations of the fellaheen were a lot more analytical in Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians than the negative overtones found in later English works.

First published in 1842, Manners was written by Lane during his 1833-5 trip to Egypt, and included a couple of chapters directly concerned with the lower classes. He explained that the fellaheen were extremely poor – their earnings were scarcely enough to cover the basic necessities in life, and were they forced to work extremely hard for those meager wages. (Lane, 198) This caused many of the poor children to have a “neglected appearance” – they were very dirty and scantily

clothed. Sometimes the children's filthy eyes were covered by flies, which the parents failed to clean as doing so was considered unhealthy. (Lane, 58) Sometimes this poverty forced the fellaheen to sell their children into slavery, or, to prevent their children from being seized into forced labor by the local sheikhs, the children were crippled on purpose. Sometimes eyes were poked out, pulled out, fingers cut off or teeth broken to reduce their usefulness. (Lane, 200-1)

Lane's description of the fellaheen didn't stop at their economic or physical constraints. In his chapter on Egyptian character, Lane interpreted their traits based on his observations. Unlike Cromer later in the nineteenth century, Lane found a number of positive characteristics within the Egyptian lower classes. They were generally polite to foreigners, cheerful even in their appalling living conditions, and hospitable. Crime was infrequent in many of these villages, though Lane noted that there seemed to be an increase in crime (including the cruelty to animals) in areas where there was contact with Europeans. Lane also gave them credit for superior mental abilities, though with a caveat:

The natural or innate character of the modern Egyptians is altered, in a remarkable degree, by their religion, laws, and government, as well as by the climate and other causes; and to form a just opinion of it is, therefore, very difficult. We may, however, confidently state, that they are endowed, in a higher degree than most other people, with some of the more important mental qualities; particularly, quickness of apprehension, a ready wit, and a retentive memory. In youth, they generally possess these and other intellectual powers; but the causes above alluded to gradually lessen their mental energy. (Lane, 283)

Other negative characteristics were blamed on external forces as well. Lane said their laziness could be attributed to the desert climate, while their inability to

tell the truth could be traced back to Mohammed commending falsehood in a number of circumstances. (Lane, 312) Finally, other unfavorable traits were simply stated as fact. The fellaheen were obstinate, unable to finish projects on time, and able to make or do things perfectly. Finally, in a subject Lane returned to over and over again in Manners, and with which Said had the biggest issue, the women of Egypt were very lustful. Adultery was a problem in Egypt, solved by the wife's family throwing her tied to a stone into the Nile, or cut to pieces to protect the reputation of the family. Overall, Lane's view of the fellaheen was negative:

In the worst points of view, they resemble their Bedawee ancestors, without possessing many of the virtues of the inhabitants of the desert, unless in an inferior degree; and the customs which they have inherited from their forefathers often have a very baneful effect upon their domestic state. (Lane, 201-2)

Lane's book is an example of how the fellaheen were viewed by the English: negatively, but with some positive traits hidden by their living conditions that suggested the Egyptian people could be saved.

Over the next fifty years the attitudes of the English towards the fellaheen became more unfavorable. When the English first became involved in Egyptian internal affairs in the 1870s and 1880s, the fellaheen were not blamed for their own inability to take control over their situation, but it was the centuries of history that held them down.

An article in the April 1881 issue of *The Edinburgh Review*, "Egypt Bound and Unbound", reinforces the idea that the fellaheen were held down by history, and the English responsibility to overcome it. "The fellah, so pulverized for centuries that it

was thought he could never hope again, dares not only to hope but to feel that he is a being capable of participating in governments.” (Edinburgh, 336) In “The Egyptian Rebellion” from the August 1882 edition of *The Edinburgh Review*, there were two present oppressors of the fellaheen as well: the bondholders holding Egypt’s debt, and Urabi, the leader of a revolt against the Egyptian government and European intervention in Egypt’s internal matters. According to the article, the main reason for the British response was a desire to remove both of these shackles from the peasants. There were of course British interests, and these were not denied, but the cost and misery of the rebellion that would have wound up on the fellaheen’s shoulders was the overriding factor for invading. Indeed, without letting the lower classes speak for themselves, the article claims the fellaheen were already better off following the defeat of Urabi than they had been before the British became actively involved in the country a few years earlier. (Edinburgh, 557-560)

Unfortunately, the shift towards the English belief in Western superiority and Oriental inferiority worsened, as the English press, colonial administrators and the majority of the public supported the idea of the “White Man’s Burden”: imperialism was a righteous thing to do, since the East was incapable of doing it itself. Social Darwinism dictated that the European man was superior in every way to other races, and therefore it was England’s God given responsibility to cultivate the other races, no matter how long it might take to do so. (Said, 39-41) The viewpoint expressed by George Warrington Steevens, a British journalist and writer who wrote Egypt in 1898, is an excellent example of this English attitude at the end of the nineteenth century. In his opinion, Orientals were extremely lazy. During one of his

visits, he noted a couple of Egyptian men "...mending the tramway – squatting down to do it in true oriental style, but the fact that they are mending anything at all is staggeringly un-oriental." (Steevens, 61) Steevens believed the Oriental mind was too inferior to the Western one to overcome the backwardness of Egyptian lifestyle as well:

As soon as he leaves the harem – often already corrupted by the women – and is no longer a baby, he jumps at a bound to being a man. A boy will do well in his classes up to (the age of) fourteen, fifteen, sixteen; and then suddenly the cafes and hashish and mistresses claim him, and from a bright-eyed urchin he becomes a sallow, flashy, sodden, stupid dissipated man about town. (Steevens, 110)

When he describes the results of educational efforts by the English, Steevens ignores the positive attributes seen by Lane sixty years later.

The Egyptian schoolboy is parrot-like in his unintelligence, incorrigible in his inaccuracy, hopelessly fatuous in his inaccuracy in his dishonesty. He understands ordinary English, if you ask him questions, uncommonly well; but he will reel off a page of text-book, understanding the meaning of each word, but without an idea of the connected sense of it. (Steevens, 120)

The obligation of the British to rule over and encourage the Egyptians' cultural development was not always pretty. Steevens suggested that harsh beatings of the young Egyptians would be the only way they could learn. "The Oriental mind sees no hardship in sitting a few hours (in prison) doing nothing; and the penance leaves an offender hardened with whom a good thrashing would be an abiding influence through life." He lamented that British teachers were not allowed to begin with beatings of the young Egyptians in an effort to remedy their

uncivilized ways. (Steevens, 116-7) But Steevens did not feel any beatings would solve the perceived problems of the Egyptians in the short-term. He hinted at the long-term prognosis when he suggested that Cromer's reforms would "someday" allow private enterprise to help the fellaheen, but on page 188 he comments directly on when he thought they would succeed:

The Egyptian question has been answered. Lord Cromer has sat still, declining to be worried or flurried, until it has answered itself. The question was, 'When is England going to quit Egypt?' The answer was, 'Never.' The provisional answer given from time to time has been, 'When, first it is quite certain that no other Power will enter Egypt; and, second, Egypt is capable of setting up a tolerable Government for itself. In the course of the past fifteen years the latter answer to the question has gradually approximated to the former. "When" has come gradually nearer and nearer to "Never." (Steevens, 188)

Evelyn Baring's own opinion is a prime example of the changing attitude towards the *fellaheen*. Initially, Cromer viewed his own role in fixing Egypt through the instillation of free market reforms through Westernized local politicians as a short-term end of the occupation. As a promoter of himself and the God-given responsibility to the English to look after the Egyptians, Cromer regularly returned to London to convince skeptics of the cause, and he was convincing. After one such meeting with Joseph Chamberlain, Chamberlain said, "Britain had no right to abandon the duty which has been cast upon us." Cromer also repeated the role God had cast for Britain: save the Egyptian race from bankruptcy, assist in their struggle for water, and to succeed would take "the best qualities of the British race." (Owen, 248-51) Cromer considered himself the best man to steer Egypt towards

independence, since Egyptians could not do it themselves, and he was objective in setting economic policies to achieve that goal. (Owen, 136) In 1884, Baring wrote that had England taken a more pro-active role concerning the Mahdist revolt in Sudan, “we should by this time be much further advanced...towards the attainment of the object which we have in view, viz., ...to leave Egypt to govern itself.” (Owen, 201) As for the peasants, he seemed more fascinated than annoyed with the *fellaheen*'s ability to survive centuries under crushing conditions, and wished to help them as much as could. He wrote a friend,

“I consider the fellah quite as interesting, to use the French phrase, as the creditors – perhaps more so; and if Romaine had set to work to ameliorate the fellah's lot in a reasonable way he would have had my cordial support.” (Mansfield, 11)

During this time however, Cromer became more and more insulated from the common Egyptian and relied on his own beliefs in the superiority of the Western ways and Oriental stereotypes to dictate his methods of rule. Whereas in the 1870s he had some contact with the locals, the longer he stayed in Egypt the less contact he had with Egyptians, and by 1886 he had soured on the idea that Egyptians could someday govern themselves. (Owen, 219) Information about Egyptian opinion became filtered through his subordinate Harry Boyle and his service of agents and informers. As a result, Baring (by then Lord Cromer) believed less and less in an Egypt that could govern itself. (Owen, 282) As a result of his detachment from the colonized, Cromer became more distant from the *fellaheen*. Cromer was not the only one who disregarded them. Sir Auckland Colvin wrote The Making of Modern Egypt in 1906, a book that outlined Egyptian history since the British arrived in the

1870s. In over four hundred pages, Colvin mentioned the *fellaheen* but once in reference to another work. (Colvin, 281)

After he retired from public service, Cromer reflected on his time served in his memoirs Modern Egypt, and his description of the living conditions of the *fellaheen* reflected more his views of history, British policy and social Darwinism than any contacts with Egyptians. In his opinion the British were in Egypt to help its people as only the British could. Their goals were to give justice and equal rights to all Egyptians, and create the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Since the majority of Egyptians were *fellaheen*, the focus should have been on improving their lives, a task made incredibly difficult since foreign rulers had oppressed most of the Egyptian populace for sixty centuries. As a result, the *fellaheen* were “poor, ignorant and incredulous”, yet through it all they remained a kind people, the “rawest of raw materials” that the English could shape into a race that could rule itself, though it was a job that would take centuries to complete. (Cromer 130-1)

Cromer applauded the efforts he and the colonial administration made to improve the conditions of the *fellaheen*. He alleged that the *fellaheen* had no privileges when the British arrived in Egypt. The use of forced labor (*corvée*) used to clean the canals along the Nile River was a perfect example. This degrading job was outlawed, as was slavery. The tax rates on the lower classes were also lowered considerably, but Cromer speculated the *fellaheen* would never equate British rule with the betterment of their lives. Some of the peasants might be able to identify the British as the cause of their improved situation but generally the *fellaheen* lacked

the logical ability to associate the two, and therefore could not appreciate the British involvement in Egypt. The term “subaltern” was not in use in Cromer’s time. He instead referred to them as political ciphers, “too apathetic, too ignorant and too little accustomed to take the initiative, to give utterance in any politically audible form to their opinions even when they have any.” (Cromer 194) At other times, he regarded his subjects as “naughty children steeped in mendacity”, and suggested the Egyptian mind was as far away from a European’s intellectually as “an inhabitant of Saturn.” (Brendon, 179-81)

Unfortunately, Cromer didn’t stop there in describing the rural peasants. It appears he gave this subject a lot of thought:

“Many of the observations contained in this chapter may be considered commonplace. Nothing, indeed, has been stated which will be new to those who have paid attention to Eastern affairs, or who are in any degree familiar with the social life of the East. I have, however, thought it desirable to make a catalogue – and, I may add, a very incomplete catalogue – of the main points as to which Egyptian and European habits of thought and customs diverge...” (Cromer 164-5)

Cromer didn’t create a catalogue, but he might as well have done so. He spent the better part of forty pages outlining his impressions of the *fellaheen*, listing traits that would be used against the rural peasants in the trial following the Denshawai Incident. Cromer declared “untruthfulness” to be a main characteristic of the Oriental mind. He went into detail and explained how the Eastern mind lacked symmetry, which led to illogical reasoning. Without giving examples, he claimed the average Egyptian was incapable of drawing the most obvious conclusions from

situations presented to them. Worse, Cromer stated that one could not get a “simple statement of facts” from an Egyptian. The statement would be long and unclear, with numerous contradictions throughout. (Cromer 146-7)

Cromer continued his analysis of the villagers as eyewitnesses. He stated that eyewitnesses would swear to anything on the stand in return for payment. This caused a problem for the “just” English court of law, as their legal system would not be able to get to the bottom of a crime through the testimony of a *fellah*. Cromer argued that since the Oriental system did not contain the same checks against power and unjust punishment, floggings and other methods of torture were needed to get a rural person to admit “the truth”. To emphasize his point, he told a story taken from Sir Donald Mackenzie Wallace’s book, Egypt and the Egyptian Question. Wallace wrote a story in which the ruler Mehmet Ali went to a village in search of two robbers, who were thought to be hiding in the town. The local leaders claimed they knew nothing of the thieves, until the six of them were forced to lay face down on the dusty ground. Mehmet Ali’s enforcers then began to whip the bottom of the sheikhs’ feet, a practice known to Wallace as *bastinado*. Almost immediately one of the sheikhs admitted that they knew where the robbers were, and minutes later the thieves were turned over to Mehmet Ali and hanged. (Cromer 189-90)

According to Cromer, the brutalization of the population, both through despotic rule and intimidation on a local level, was typical of the Oriental world. He opined, “Oriental punishments are cruel, whilst European punishments are mild. This fact tends towards brutalizing the population, and rendering them cruel to each other.” He suggested the *fellaheen* respected leaders who used tough enforcement

rather than kindness, a theory put into practice at the Denshawai trial. (Cromer 147)

Not surprisingly, the English-language press followed the lead of the unchecked ruler of British Egypt and his administrators. *The Egyptian Gazette* was founded in 1880, just a year after England's initial involvement in the country and following the bankruptcy and exile of Ismail Pasha. Early on, Andrew Philip guided the daily newspaper, and the *Gazette* became the mouthpiece for British policy in Egypt. (Raafat) John Edwin Marshall, a judge in the *Egyptian* Native Court of Appeal, asserted that Cromer was in constant contact with Mr. Philip to inform the editor what opinion he expected the newspaper to show. Marshall quipped: "Mr. Philip invariably took any hints given him." (Marshall 23)

Mr. Philip passed away in 1899 and was succeeded by Rowland Snelling, who was the editor of the paper at the time of Denshawai. The policy of active involvement in *The Egyptian Gazette's* reporting continued with the new editor, and it wasn't until Cromer's successor Sir Eldon Gorst took over in 1907 that this practice stopped. Marshall pointed out that Cromer's contact wasn't just with the editor, but with authors who submitted work for publication with the *Gazette*. After an unsigned article appeared in a February 1904 issue, Cromer wrote to Marshall and asked if he were the anonymous author. Marshall claimed not to have written it, and told Cromer. Cromer responded that it did not matter if that particular article was Marshall's or not:

"I think in view of your (Marshall's) position, that it would be better to abstain altogether from writing in the Press. I send a copy of

the rules on the subject. I conceive that it applies to the judicial as well as to the executive services.” (Marshall 26-7)

The English, and especially Lord Cromer, lost touch with the local populace. John Marlowe, in his book The History of Modern Egypt and Anglo-Egyptian Relations argued that the Denshawai Incident could not have happened earlier in its colonial history.

“The British official hierarchy had during the previous ten years surrounded itself with a protective covering of subservient Egyptian opinion which effectively insulated it from any knowledge of what the Egyptian people were really saying, feeling, and thinking. Fifteen years earlier the execution of the Denshawai sentences would have been inconceivable, not only because of their injustice, but because the effect on Egyptian opinion would have been appreciated. By 1906 British officials in Egypt had become more responsive to the views and prejudices of their colleagues than they were to the well-being of the people whom they were supposed to be governing.”

Marlowe opined, “Cromer himself was not the sympathetic administrator he had been. He now enjoyed dictatorial power in Egypt. To the British Government, as well as to the Egyptian Government, his word was law.” (Marlowe 169-70) So, on the eve of the Denshawai, English opinion of Orientals was at its nadir. Most colonial administrators believed the *fellaheen* had few redeeming qualities, and were unable to save themselves; therefore they would need English guidance and rule with a strong hand for generations to come. The colonial administrators controlled the English-language press, spreading the *fellaheen* stereotype. Finally, Cromer and others had walled themselves off from the Egyptian people, thereby making them unable to gauge the *fellaheen* opinion had they even wanted to. An

event like Denshawai was inevitable under these conditions; it was just a matter of where and when. In June of 1906 it finally happened.

The account of the Denshawai Incident is based on reports submitted to Parliament and *The Egyptian Gazette* accounts. At 1 pm on 13 June 1906, five British officers left their camp at Kamsheesh and went on horseback to Denshawai village, about seven miles away. Halfway there, four dismounted and got into carriages presented to them by Mohammed al-Shazly, the Omdeh of Denshawai. The fifth officer remained on horseback. A few miles from the outskirts of the village, a couple of locals approached them and warned them in Arabic about shooting pigeons in the area. The officers' translator did not consider the warning serious, and so did not relate it to Major Pine-Coffin, the commanding officer who had gone pigeon shooting in Denshawai the two previous years. Upon reaching the outskirts of the village, the officers left the carriages and split into two groups. Three officers - Captain Bull, Lieutenant Smithwick and Major Pine-Coffin - went a half mile north of Denshawai, while Captain Bostock and Lieutenant Porter took up positions about 150 yards closer to the village. Trouble started soon after they began firing on the pigeons. A fire broke out in a threshing house near Bostock and Porter, and the villagers assumed the British shooting to be the cause. A number of local *fellaheen* began to gather around them, and interfered with the two men's ability to continue shooting. Bostock was grabbed, and Porter went to his aid. The other three officers saw trouble was brewing, and rushed to Bostock and Porter's aid. The villagers struggled with Porter, trying to disarm him of his Martini-Enfield Rifle. Just before it

was wrestled from his grip, Porter was able to click the safety catch on. But it was to no avail. As villagers struggled over control of the weapon, it fired.

The crowd parted following the shot. Four *fellaheen* were on the ground injured, including a woman. When Major Pine-Coffin arrived at the scene, he assumed that Lieutenant Porter had shot the woman, and therefore signaled to the crowd that Porter was under arrest. This did not satisfy the mob and it grew in size and anger. Once Pine-Coffin realized the arrest would not placate the growing masses, he turned his gun over to them and signaled the other officers to do the same. The officers retreated in the direction of the carriages; a hundred *fellaheen* grew bolder. Clods of earth were thrown at the officers, then bricks, and then some of the more aggressive locals attacked with *nabouts*, sticks 6 to 9 feet in length. The officers made it to the carriages and boarded them, but the Denshawai villagers would not let them leave. They were pulled from the carriages and beaten. The officers managed to get to their feet to run towards camp, but time and again projectiles and wooden poles hit them. Major Pine-Coffin fell, and Porter and Smithwick returned to aid their commander. Bostock and Bull raced away while the mob's attention focused on the three left behind. Bostock reached camp around 4:30 pm, but Bull wasn't as fortunate. Two strong blows to his head had concussed him, and in the 105° heat he didn't have a chance. Captain Seymour Clarke Bull collapsed about a mile and a half from camp. A patrol of mounted infantry found him unconscious and carried him back to camp where he passed away around 7 pm.

The three officers left behind were taken back to the village and forced to sit next to where Ohm Mohammed, the injured woman, lay. A few of the villagers took

their fingers and made a “slash” across their throats, signaling to the officers the obvious meaning to have them killed. In the nick of time, the local sheikhs and guards arrived, and managed to move the officers away from the mob and encircle them to prevent any more harm. The three men were given water and led to a safer place away from the masses until a local police officer arrived. He had the British put into carriages and the guards escorted them towards the camp. The mounted patrol sent out by Bostock’s arrival met up with them and returned with the officers back to Kamsheesh.

In the days following Denshawai (but before the trial), the *Egyptian Gazette* continued to spew forth the administration’s (and most of the English) Orientalist views of the *fellaheen*. Therefore it is not surprising how the *fellaheen* of Denshawai are described in the paper in the days following the attack on the British officers of 13 June 1906. On Friday the 15th the first reports appeared. They alleged that a British officer, Captain Seymour Clarke Bull of the 6th Inniskilling Dragoons, had been killed, and two other officers, Major Pine-Coffin and Lieutenant Smithwick were badly injured. But details beyond these were uncertain. (*Gazette* 15 June 1906) The following day writers at the *Gazette* explained the reasons for the mistrust of stories coming in from Denshawai: they were suspicious of local witnesses. Since the peasants could not be expected to tell the truth, the paper reported they would wait for confirmation from British authorities sent to investigate (*Gazette*, 16 June 1906) Throughout the Denshawai Incident, in the coverage of the *fellaheen* they were regularly called “natives”, suggesting an image of uncivilized savages living in the rural villages.

On 18 June the *Egyptian Gazette* announced that more trustworthy (read: English) correspondents would be replacing the local correspondents covering Denshawai, and not surprisingly the image of the *fellaheen* in the paper worsened. That day it was reported the officers were “absolutely guiltless” in the attack, as they were assaulted by a “savage mob.” They described the entire village as being “most degraded and ignorant.” The article disparaged everything about Denshawai (spelled Denishwai throughout the coverage of that year). The villagers were dismissed as 3,300 “savage and criminal people”, mostly illiterate, who lived on a diet of rats and mice. Another insult, not as well comprehended today but readily understood by the British in Egypt in 1906 was reference to the villagers being a “very dark people.” It was also reported that many of the inhabitants of Denshawai were convicts. (18 June 1906)

Another article focused on the *fellaheen* of Denshawai was published on 21 June. “At least in villages they are clean-feeding their animals,” the trusted correspondent reported, but that was as close as it came to a compliment. The article stated rats and mice were an upgrade from what the villagers normally ate, in view of the fact that “a friend” once saw some *fellaheen* eat the raw entrails of a fox, and often they would simply engage in “earth-eating”. (*Gazette* 21 June 1906)

Numerous times over the three-week period, a gathering of the villagers (either during the incident itself or at the execution of the rendered sentences) was called a “mob”.

Concurrently, the *Egyptian Gazette* painted a saintly image of the British officers. The term “brutally attacked” was used in successive issues (18 and 19

June), and in the latter the paper praised the restraint and conduct of “our officers and men.” In the 18 June issue, before the trial commenced, it was reported that the officers were “absolutely guiltless”. The long authoritarian reach of Lord Cromer extended throughout the weeks following the Denshawai Incident in an attempt to steer public opinion in favor of the government’s actions. The day after he and Lady Cromer left from Port Said on summer vacation on 19 June, the *Egyptian Gazette* issued the following statement in an effort to stem off rampant rumors of the accused being guilty before the trial: “we are requested to contradict the report appearing in other papers that the scaffold at the Police Stores, Boulac, was tested yesterday and afterwards sent to Denshawai.” (*Gazette* 19 June 1906) There is little doubt that the British colonial government made the request, as Cromer’s opinion was *The Egyptian Gazette’s*.

Thus, on the eve of the Special Court called for by the colonial administration to try the accused of Denshawai, the English-language press and British government had very negative, narrow views on how the *fellaheen* should be tried and their testimony treated in a court case. According to assumptions that were in place when the *fellaheen* of Denshawai went on trial for the death of Captain Seymour Clarke Bull, the subalterns’ testimonies could not be trusted. The prosecutors assumed the guilt of the accused, rather than the accepted “innocent until proven guilty” credo. This placed the burden of proof on the defendants, not the prosecutors. It was also clear then that the British viewed the *fellaheen* as cunning enough to plan Denshawai. Following the attack, the investigators looked for premeditation, and they jumped to conclusions to get there. Perhaps most tellingly,

Cromer and the colonial administrators maintained rural peasants were only impressed with power. Therefore, the trial need not be conducted in accordance with the reforms the English had made to the Egyptian justice system, but rather it was to be conducted under the guidelines established by the Khedival Decree of 25 February 1895, as requested by Major-General Bullock, the Commanding Officer of the Army of Occupation. This Decree was to be used when crimes were committed by any natives against the soldiers and/or officers of the occupying army, and would take place in the district where the crime took place. It was established for the sole purpose of “having ready to hand some machinery which, should the necessity arise, could deal very swiftly and summarily with such cases” (i.e., attack on occupation forces by natives). The Decree also made it possible to inflict severer punishment than was possible under the Code. (Great Britain 1) This decision on sentencing would come back to haunt the colonial authorities.

Five judges were assigned to the case: Boutros Pasha Ghali (interim Minister of Justice), William G. Hayter (acting Judicial Adviser to the Native Courts), Mr. W. Bond (Vice-President of the Native Court of Appeal), Ahmed Bey Fathy Zaghoul (President of the Native Courts), and Lieutenant-Colonel Ludlow (Acting Judge-Advocate of the Army of Occupation). (Great Britain, 66) Of these five, only two knew Arabic, and only one was a Muslim. Boutros Ghali was a Copt, and since there were tensions between Copts and Muslims in Egypt, many locals presumed Ghali would give no favors to the defendants. In addition, it was widely accepted that Ahmed Bey Zaghoul and the prosecuting attorneys were attempting to curry favor with the British in an effort to gain advancement within the colonial administration.

(Marshall, 83-4) In view of a severe shortage of adequately trained, experienced Egyptian lawyers who were not in awe of the English, the *fellaheen* were facing an impossible situation. (Mansfield, 130-1)

In addition the difficulties facing the defendants during the trial, the sentences rendered at the tribunal were not subject to the reformed Penal Code. In other words, while the English had been phasing out the use of flogging as a preferred method of punishment, as well as the death penalty, the Tribunal would not be bound by those constraints. Once the sentences were delivered, they could not be appealed and would be carried out immediately following the trial. (Great Britain 4) This was in line with Steevens' and Cromer's opinion that the peasants were unimpressed with jail, but respected a show of violence and power.

On the morning of June 14th, Mohamed Ibrahim, the local magistrate, began his investigation into Denshawai. The injured officers were medically evaluated at the camp in Kamsheesh, and then given immunity for their testimony. After the three capable of giving statements did so (Major Pine-Coffin had been sent to a hospital in nearby Tanta for medical treatment on his arm, and was therefore unable), the governor took Captain Bostock and Mr. Porter back to Denshawai to identify locals who may have been involved. Twelve had already been arrested, though the officers could only identify two as attackers. They recognized another three, but could not say more than they had been present. Over the next three days Mohamed Shoukri and Mohamed Ibrahim, the governor of the province, conducted interrogations and interviews with 57 persons: villagers, *ghaffirs* (guards), sheikhs and possible witnesses for the prosecution.

The results were interesting. Among the three of them, the officers were able to identify seventeen villagers; thirteen of them were recognized as being among the attackers, either by chasing the officers, throwing earth and bricks at them, or using a *nabout* (a stick 6-9 feet in length) in an effort to injure the officers. Not surprisingly, all of these *fellaheen* were arrested – for six of them, there were no other eyewitnesses or testimony as to their whereabouts nor were they needed. Another four were seen in the crowd, but the officers could not identify whether these peasants had done anything aggressive. Two of them had no other eyewitnesses besides the two officers, yet all four were arrested. Finally, two other suspects looked familiar to the officers, but Bostock and Porter could not be sure. Both of these men were arrested as well.

By Saturday morning thirty-five Denshawai *fellaheen* had been arrested and authorities were searching for another ten. (Great Britain, 43) For some, there were plenty of eyewitnesses. But for others, the evidence was scarce. Here is a line of questioning from Mohamed Ibrahim, the *Chef de Parquet* (head of the public prosecutors office), to Youssef Hassan Selim, a *fellaheen*:

Q: It is established by the inquiry that the villagers were assembled at the place of the incident, and that the persons who took part in the aggression against the officers were not less than 100. What do you say to this?

A: The people were pell-mell. The officers were running and the people running after them.

Q: Who are the persons who were running after the officers?

A: I do not know them.

Q: How is it that you do not know them, when they live in the same village with you?

A: They were all pell-mell.

Q: Who were they that were all pell-mell?

A: They were pell-mell. It was the Mahfouz family who was pursuing the officers.

Youssef then named eleven members of the Mahfouz family. Youssef was one of the main suspects, and may have been trying to throw the authorities off his trail, but whether he spoke the truth or not didn't matter. All eleven Mahfouzs were arrested, some without questioning. (Great Britain 8-10) According to eyewitness reports, over one hundred villagers had participated in the attack, and the British intended to punish every single one of them.

At four o'clock on Sunday morning, Mohamed Ibrahim ordered Denshawai to be cordoned off to prevent the escape of any *fellaheen* who had yet to be arrested. Three villagers were caught trying to sneak away, each subsequently recognized by the officers. Ibrahim listened to some witnesses a few of the suspects offered, but all gave shaky testimony that failed to exonerate those locals. This no doubt reinforced the belief that the *fellaheen* could not tell the truth and would crumble under cross-examination. For example, Ibrahim interrogated Mustapha Darweesh, a witness for El-Saïd Issa.

"He was asked in the presence of the person who asked for his evidence. He said: -

"I know El-Saïd Issa, and he is a cousin of Ahmed Helal."

Q: Did El-Saïd Issa come to your village, and on what day did he come?

A: He came to me last Sunday and stayed till Friday, when he learnt about the incident.

Q: How can it be imagined that the said person was at your village till Friday, and two of the officers identified him and said that he was among those who attacked them?

A: I do not know.

Q: What is the distance between Sarmosa and Denshawai?

A: A "malaka" and half (i.e., about 1 mile and a half)

Q: Is it not possible that the accused came to his village on the day of the incident and then returned to your village?

A: God knows.

Q: Were you always with him when he was at your village?

A: No. (Great Britain, 42)

Finally, there was a breakthrough relating to other participants. Ahmed Bey Habib, an Omdeh (village headman) from a nearby village, learned from Mohamed el-Shazly, the Omdeh of Denshawai, who the ringleaders of the attack were. The main two suspects were Abd-el Razik Mahfouz and Mohamed Darweesh Zahran. Razik told Ibrahim that two of the missing guns were at Zahran's house, and a search found them buried in a room, with access to the outside. Zahran claimed his enemy Razik Mahfouz planted them there, but not surprisingly Razik denied the charge. Unfortunately for Zahran, he had a prior record: even though he had been found innocent of the death of Razik's uncle he had spent a year in jail for false accusations. The Denshawai Omdeh's sources were interviewed as well, each of them backing the story passed along through Ahmed Bey Habib and el-Shazly. (Great Britain, 49-54)

The authorities then looked more closely at the fire and injuries suffered by the *fellaheen*. If the prosecutors could tear down the stories of how the threshing floor fire began, and where and how the four villagers were injured, they could suggest the attack was premeditated. To make their point and introduce expert testimony into evidence, tests were done as to whether a bullet shot from a gun could cause the fire. Six times, from distances of thirty-five to two hundred feet, the Police Commandant shot at a pile of threshed corn. Each was a direct hit, but no flame. (Great Britain, 53-4) As a result of the tests, and indirectly the stereotype of

the *fellaheen* as being “cunning”, the investigators and attacked officers believed the fire was set as a signal for villagers to attack. (Great Britain 45) The analysis of the injured villagers proved that each of them had been in close proximity to the Martini-Enfield rifle when it fired: one of the locals had the bullet lodged in his leg (on a downward trajectory), and the other three were hit with gunpowder residue that burned their skin. The investigators then disregarded reports of more than one shot – the officers’ testimony and evidence that only one person was **hit** proved the *fellaheen* testimonies could not be trusted.

On Monday, 18 June Major Pine-Coffin made an appearance in Denshawai and gave his statement. He was then shown a number of villagers, some under arrest and others under suspicion. Pine-Coffin recognized twenty-six of them, though with seven of them he was unsure of their involvement, only that they were present. (Great Britain 57-8) By the time the investigation closed that day, another ten were arrested, bringing the total to fifty-two. Seven suspects remained missing. The investigation was closed, and evidence submitted to the tribunal.

There is little doubt that many villagers appeared during the melee, as estimates on the crowd that surrounded the officers ranged from one hundred to one hundred and fifty. But how many of them were active in attacking the officers with *nabouts* and rocks, and how could the prosecutors prove any *fellah* actually struck a blow? I asked a lawyer to review the transcripts from Denshawai. In an e-mail and phone conversation, he stressed the problem with the line of questioning used during interrogation.

“...what is striking is how many of these witnesses were called upon to exonerate themselves rather than the other way around. At the end of the day, you can’t prove a negative – you can never show that you didn’t do something. The best you can do is show alibi; which mean that you DID something else, the action of which prevents you from having done that which you are accused of because of factors of time, proximity, et cetera...In addition to the fundamental need to have the state prove charges beyond a reasonable doubt in order to ensure personal freedom, there is also the fact that requiring the converse improperly restrains personal freedom by imposing on the individual a burden that can never be met.” (DiRienzo, 21 July)

Thus, the onus was on the suspects, not the prosecutors. The arrested *fellaheen* weren’t able to prove they did not participate in the attack, but only suggest they were elsewhere. The authorities presumed they were lying, one of the reasons being that they were *fellaheen*, and that was what *fellaheen* did. For instance, Raslan el-Sayed Ali was asked where he was at the time of attack. “I was at my house, and did not go to the place of the incident.” (Great Britain, 41) El Saïd Issa: “I was not at the place of the incident in the day it took place, but was at Serasmous, with Mustapha, a relation of Ahmed Abou Hilal. We were threshing his corn. On hearing of the incident, we came to the village to-day (Friday). They arrested us, Ahmed Hilil and myself.” (Great Britain, 22) In a typical trial, these statements would be considered alibis, but these were dismissed by the investigators. The accused could not prove they did not participate in the attack, making a guilty verdict much easier to come by.

As for the expert testimony concerning the fire that started at Mohammed Abd-el Nebi Moazzin’s threshing floor, it was one thing to prove a gunshot could not have started the fire; it was another thing entirely to assume it was a signal for the

villagers to attack the officers. In taking this approach, the prosecutors established the grounds for premeditated murder, thereby making it easier to ask for the death penalty. Here, they made several related assumptions, that: a stray bullet could not have started the fire; therefore, the fire was set on purpose, because the fire was a signal to the villagers to attack. The most obvious problem with this line of thought was that there was no evidence connecting the first point to the next two points. In addition, when the fellaheen initially attacked the officers, the officers were armed, and the villagers were not. If this was a premeditated attack, the “cunning” villagers would have been more prepared, and surely a decent defense attorney would have made this point during the tribunal.

The trial began at ten o'clock in the morning on 24 June 1906, a mere eleven days after the attack at Denshawai. It was conducted in Shibin-el-Kom, about twelve miles from the incident. The temperatures approached one hundred degrees, hotter than it had been since that fateful day. Due to the heat, a tent was erected to shield the participants, and the area was roped off from the people who gathered to watch a “fair” trial. The records for the trial are poor – no minutes were taken, and the British judges could not understand the testimony given in Arabic. As a result, the report that survives today, which was sent upon request to the British Parliament, was taken from a native journalist’s notes. (Marshall, 83)

Though we do not have exact details, it is known three attorneys represented the fifty-two defendants. Not only was this contrary to Lord Cromer’s intention of providing “individual justice” to each and every Egyptian (Cromer 130), mass

representation presented an even more difficult hurdle to overcome for the defendants. No defendant was able to press for his own innocence, and the attorneys who represented co-conspirators were forced to sacrifice some defendants in order to save others. For example, Youssef Hassan Selim turned evidence against Mohamed el-Ghobachi el-Sayed Ali (Great Britain, 9), even though the same attorney represented them. (Great Britain, 67) Another example of this quandary for the accused was illustrated by Ahmed Ali Shaalan's interview:

Q: Were you at the threshing-floor yesterday?

A: No, I was with the Sheikh of ghaffirs (guards), Hassan Masrab, at Kafr Higazi. I went to him in the morning and did not return until sunset.

Q: Why, then, do they accuse you in this affair?

A: Ali Mahfouz, the Sheikh el-Beled, is the uncle of Abd-el-Mottaleb Mohamed Mahfouz. There is a law-suit pending between me and the former at the Court of Shibin. I have obtained judgment against Mohamed Mustapha Mahfouz. The Sheikh el-Beled bears me a grudge because judgment was given against him, and he has therefore denounced me. (Great Britain, 12-3)

Both men were represented by Mohammed Bey Youssef.

After the rules of the Special Court were read, the fifty-two defendants were indicted under the charges of premeditated murder and robbery with violence. Ibrahim Bey el-Hilbawi, the prosecuting attorney, asked the court to condemn the men to the most severe penalty possible – death by hanging. While that thought sank into everyone's mind, all the defendants were organized by number for court records. (Great Britain 67) It took a half hour, after which the prosecuting attorney interrogated each defendant. It was a sham. Fifty-two *fellaheen* testified for a total

of thirty-four minutes, just enough time for each to state his name, and give a one-sentence alibi. (al-Sayyid 171)

A total of four witnesses testified on behalf of two defendants, while the other fifty sat defenseless and watched. From late Sunday morning until Monday at 5 pm, the prosecution introduced twenty-seven witnesses, as well as readings of the medical examinations of Captain Bull's body (according to which the two blows to the head, coupled with extreme heat on that afternoon caused death) and of the injuries to the officers and villagers. The prosecution cited the lack of evidence for a stray bullet causing the fire, which suggested the villagers had set it. A few of the condemned heckled Bey-el-Hilbawi until they were removed from the court.

When Hilbawi finished, the defense attorneys were given a chance to present their cases. (Great Britain, 69) Despite all the failures of British justice, in the case they had outlined a decent case against the fifty-two accused. The defense had a difficult mountain to climb. It had to prove innocence rather than create reasonable doubt. To do so, it needed to attack the premise of premeditation. The prosecuting attorneys had not proven the fire was started as a signal, merely that it had not been started by an errant bullet. The defense could also show that the lack of weapons initially suggested no premeditation. Finally, the autopsy showed two fatal blows had caused Captain Bull's death. The defense could sacrifice some of the defendants by showing they had deliberately targeted Captain Bull's head. That might convince the judges that most of the villagers were angry, but not to the point of intending to commit murder. Maybe those peasants found with the officer's possessions in their house would get a slap on the wrist, and the rest would be released. But the defense

chose to do nothing. The court took a half-hour break, before the prosecutors went back on the attack.

Hilbawi's summation was over three hours long, since he went back through all the evidence. He also focused on six of the defendants whom he called the ringleaders: Hassan Aly Mahfouz, Ahmed Mohamed el-Seessy, Youssef Hussein Selim, Mohamed Abdel Nebi-el-Moazzin, Ahmed Abdel Aal Mahfouz, and Mohamed Darweesh Zahran. He tied the charge of premeditated murder to each, and added in past criminal records and the robbing of the officers for el-Seessy, Selim, Nebi-al-Moazzin and Zahran. (Gazette 26 June)

For the remaining forty-six witnesses, Hilbawi outlined the testimony against each and who gave it. When he was finished, he expressed his wish to see all fifty-two sentenced to the harshest possible punishment. The special court, per its own rules, was not bound by any set of laws or limits for punishment. Therefore, Hilbawi argued, the six ringleaders should be hanged, while the others should each receive life imprisonment.

The first of the defense attorneys, Mohamed Bey Youssef, stood to defend his clients. Based on notes from the trial, it could be surmised that this Cairo-educated lawyer held the same stereotypes of the *fellaheen* as the English. The nation of Egypt was embarrassed by what happened, he argued, but it would not affect the colonial administration or Egypt as a whole because it happened in a poor village that was terribly ignorant. This was not representative of Egypt - only the *fellaheen*, and they were non-entities. Hilbawi eventually turned to analyzing the evidence against the accused. He reviewed the expert testimony, and questioned some of the

weak links made between his clients and the charges. El Sayed-el-Oufi for instance only had one witness against him, a witness who lied many times in his testimony. Major Pine-Coffin was the only officer who recognized El Sayed-el-Oufi from the melee, but could not identify him as an attacker. Abdel Razek Hasan Mahfouz was on trial because he knew where the weapons were hidden, ran away in fear and was caught. His guilt by association (he was a part of the Mahfouz family), did not warrant a guilty verdict, according to Youssef. (Great Britain, 73-4)

On the last day, the three lawyers made arguments in defense of their many clients, at times sacrificing one to protect another. They questioned the evidence, but never cross-examined the accusers. They begged for clemency, citing the ignorance and short-tempered nature of the *fellaheen*. In the end, the defense did not try to prove the innocence of the suspects, but instead relied on another stereotype – the view the British had of themselves as being just, fair and civilized. The defense appealed to their better natures to let a majority of the accused go, prosecute the ones who were the leaders, and show how just the British were by treating the guilty with leniency. In the end, the outcome of the trial was determined before it began.

One might think that only twenty-one convictions out of fifty-two would be a rousing success for the Denshawai villagers. Upon closer examination, one can see how important the testimony of the British officers was in comparison to that of the *fellaheen*. Of the eight defendants identified as being aggressive participants, seven were found guilty. The only one not guilty was Mohamed Salim Ads, who was seen by Mr. Porter in the crowd and nothing more, though Major Pine-Coffin identified

him as an attacker. Of the twenty-four identified by at least one officer, nineteen were convicted. Contrast that with the testimonies of the local peasants. Seventeen *fellaheen* on trial were accused by five or more villagers, yet only ten were found guilty, and none of the ten were convicted without the corroborating testimony of an officer.

Stereotypes played a large part in the decisions and sentencing. The British were able to pat themselves on the back for being fair and just, as most of the villagers were found not guilty. But the punishments reflected the British stereotype that the *fellaheen* respected harsh rulers rather than lenient ones. Four men: Hassan Aly Mahfouz (head of the Mahfouz family, and owner of the dove-cots), Youssef Hussein Selim, El Sayed Issa Salem, and Mohamed Darweesh Zahran were condemned to death by hanging, and twelve others found guilty and sentenced to various prison terms, ranging from one year to life. The punishment that many considered exceptionally harsh was the decision for eight men to be whipped fifty times. The British admitted that flogging was an extreme punishment, but they needed to teach a lesson to the peasants, who allegedly only respected harsh rulers. On 28 June the twenty-one convicts were led from Chibin-el-Kom Prison towards Denshawai. A little northwest of the village, Egyptian police and British troops formed a ring around the roped-off area where the punishments were to be administered. Tents were erected, as if the circus had come to town. Just after 1:30 pm, Hassan Aly Mahfouz was led up the gallows. He hung his head, said a prayer as the cap was pulled over his head, then he loudly condemned those who had testified against him. A moment later he was hanged. In between the hangings, non-

commissioned officers of the Cairo police flogged the convicted men. One of those condemned to be whipped was an epileptic, so his penalty was waived in accord with the workings of the just British system. An hour after the punishments began, they were over. (Great Britain, 18-19) But the repercussions were only beginning.

The first and most vocal critic of the Denshawai trial and English colonial policies was Wilfrid Scawen Blunt. Blunt was an early booster of native independence, having backed Urabi during the 1882 revolt, as well as supporting Irish home rule for which he was jailed in 1888. In 1907, he published Atrocities of Justice under the English Rule in Egypt. In this sixty-seven page pamphlet, his stated goal was to show the imbalance between the English and the Egyptians under the supposed reformed court systems in Egypt, and he pointed to a series of court cases leading up to and including Denshawai to prove his point. For most of the cases he summarized the weaknesses of the English position, but on Denshawai Blunt spent over half of the pamphlet taking an extremely critical view of the prosecutors' case. Blunt did not hold back any words about Cromer, stating: "Lord Cromer...has of late years so dominated justice there that in political cases there is no Native Court, not even the Court of Criminal Appeal at Cairo, that has the smallest independence." He continued, "...The Denshawai miscarriage of justice is no exceptional error of judgment, but part of a system under which every principle of civilised law has been for years past made subservient to what has been considered political advantage." (Blunt, 10)

The first point Blunt made was about the Khedival Decree used to try the Denshawai fellaheen. According to a statement by Sir Rennell Rodd from 25 August 1901 in reference to a court case involving other officers,

There is, indeed, a special Court with very far-reaching powers, from whose sentences there is no appeal, which may be convened in exceptional circumstances to try offences against officers and men of the Army of Occupation. This Court has only been assembled twice to my knowledge since it was instituted, and in both cases for offences of a very grave character against soldiers in uniform *in the execution of their duty*. *It would have been entirely contrary to the spirit and intention in which that Tribunal was constituted to convene it in order to try an affair of this nature...*

Since the officers attacked were out shooting pigeons for pleasure, Blunt asserts the use of it for Denshawai was against the spirit of the law and therefore illegal. (Blunt, 26)

Blunt also accused the colonial administration of a cover-up of sorts, as there was no direct transcript from the trial, and the report on the trial promised to Sir Edward Grey was twenty-six days late. When it did finally arrive, there weren't any facts included – there was a pronouncement of judgment given by the judges, and a review of the trial was translated from a reporter's notes of the event. (Blunt, 36)

Blunt's most damning criticism of the tribunal pertained to the presentation of the evidence. According to the French language newspaper *L'Egypte*, the Agent of Police who accompanied the officers to Denshawai was not asked to testify for the prosecution. Instead, the defense counsel called him forward, where his testimony contradicted that of the officers. Specifically, he stated the officers had opened fire on the villagers. (Blunt, 45-6) Using the transcripts of testimony given by the

officers under immunity, Lieutenant Porter claimed he clicked the safety latch on his gun while he wrestled with the villagers, only to hear it go off after they had seized it from him. Major Pine-Coffin's statement seemed to contradict his junior officer's:

With great difficulty witness (Major Pine-Coffin) was able to reach Mr. Porter. He found him surrounded by about fifty persons who were pulling at his gun, some from behind and other from the front, and trying to take it from him. Some of them were pushing and beating him and trying to knock him down. When witness reached Mr. Porter, he heard that officer say that a shot went off and thought a woman was killed by it. Witness said to Mr. Porter *that he must not think of the gun or trouble to keep it. The witness unloaded his gun and gave it up to the crowd.* (italics mine) He asked his companions to do the same. (Great Britain, 56)

This evidence suggested that Porter never lost control of the gun, and the shot must have been fired while in his possession. The Agent of Police, an Ahmed Hassan Zagzug, was dismissed by the court before he finished his testimony, and received fifty lashes and two years imprisonment for false testimony, or, as Blunt asserted, contradicting the official report. (Blunt, 45-6)

There were other charges brought against the nature of the tribunal, and the air of superiority held by the officers. The prosecutors argued the pigeons were wild, when in fact they lived in houses built specifically for them in the village, and were bred by the Denshawai *fellaheen* and a symbol of the community's wealth. Additionally, there was an Egyptian law forbidding the firing of a gun for sporting purposes within 250 meters of a house or threshing floor, whereas the officers were less than one hundred meters from threshing floors in use. (Blunt, 48-9)

Blunt also took issue with the actual proceedings. He suggested the judges examined the details of the case before it was presented (prejudicing them more against the *fellaheen*, if possible), and that the nominal person in charge, Boutros Ghali, was brushed aside by Mr. Bond during the tribunal itself. It seemed that one of the witnesses recanted his preliminary testimony, at which point Mr. Bond scolded him with a typical Orientalist attitude: "Your contradiction nowise astonishes me. All Egyptians are alike. Not one can be trusted." Ghali was said to be uncomfortable during this exchange. The prisoners were labeled with numbers for the officers to assist in their identification by the officers, and intimidation of the attorneys prevented an adequate defense. There were other publications that took issue with Denshawai. Blunt quoted from the French *Journal du Caire* regularly, which covered the implementation of the sentences. It considered the trial to be a farce similar to the Middle Ages, and painted a heroic image of those executed and flogged. (Blunt, 44-6)

Among the British, however, opinions changed more slowly. Even after the trial was over, the *Gazette* continued to air negative "news" about the subalterns. When the verdict was printed on 27 June, an article referred to Denshawai as an "exceptionally criminal village", and even the defense lawyer got into it, calling the inhabitants an "ignorant and savage people". (Gazette 27 June 1906) In an editorial review of the verdict the following day, the *Gazette* approved of the results, saying that the "officers were wounded, robbed, and treated with cowardly brutality by an excited mob." (Gazette, 28 June 1906)

On 2 July, a letter submitted by “Yorkist” backed the harsh treatment of the convicted men. The incident served to remind expatriates of the lawlessness and savagery of the *fellaheen*, and confirmed their suppositions that the *fellaheen* were “revengeful, criminal, murderous, devastate enemies’ crops, slaughter his [own] crops.” In response to those who questioned the severity of the sentencing and the use of hangings and floggings, “Yorkist” stated that imprisonment was a holiday for the guilty. In prison, the *fellaheen* would receive free food and lodging, and fines would be useless against those without money. (*Gazette*, 2 July 1906)

The next day, the *Gazette* followed with its own views on Denshawai, which were very similar to Lord Cromer’s own opinion on the subject:

“First, we may take it as a rude check to the optimistic school. Clearly, prosperity, diminished taxation, and fair treatment has had no miraculous effect upon the fellah. He has disappointed some of our local rulers and a certain section of the public at home by a sudden relapse into ignorant brutality – and his mental equilibrium has only been restored by the application of a proportionately severe corrective. Perhaps the belief that half a generation had sufficed to civilize the fellah when our own people had occupied some centuries in the process, was a little too radiantly optimistic to be seriously held, but it is undeniable that amongst certain persons in this country there had been some self-delusions on this point.” (*Gazette* 3 July 1906)

The *Egyptian Gazette* was getting heat for its apparent callousness treatment of the *fellaheen*, so on 5 July they published the “cordial approval” pieces written by the press back in England. The *Times* reported “...Egyptian authorities have to deal not only with a brutal and unprovoked murder, but with a revolt upon a small scale on the part of the lowest and most fanatical of the Mussulman population.” The *Globe* extended a harsh view of the *fellaheen*. Its editors charged: “Murder was

meant, and murder was brutally accomplished in one instance, by a band of ruffians armed for that very purpose...Both of these functionaries must have been well aware of the evil reputation of the Denishwai people for lawlessness and anti-British sentiment.” The Tribune however reflected a more conciliatory tone:

“We know nothing of the competence or incompetence of the tribunal by which these sentences were given, and it may have been impossible to avoid passing them. But we must own that we could wish that they had less off the appearance of vindictiveness. There is something repugnant in the administration of punishment in such wholesale measure even if it be unavoidable, and in the present case, when we compare the official report with the cabled summaries of evidence, we think some extenuating circumstances appear which might have mitigated the penalty on all but the actual murderers.”
(*Gazette* 5 July 1906)

Over the years following Denshawai, more English felt an injustice had been done at Denshawai. Pressure within Parliament increased, as there were fifty-two questions specifically about Denshawai in 1906, whereas they had only been twenty questions about Egypt the previous year. (Owen, 337) In the January 1907 issue of the *Edinburgh Review*, the article “Egypt: The Old Problem and the New” continued to support the policies of Cromer, but in a more muted manner:

(Denshawai) caused a general impression that the internal condition of affairs in Egypt was not so satisfactory as had been supposed or as might reasonably be expected after the labors and sacrifices of the last twenty-three years (of Cromer’s rule)...this is certainly not the view of the great majority of Lord Cromer’s countrymen, but an impression nearly as erroneous is very generally entertained, namely that the system of government in Egypt is a benevolent despotism of which Lord Cromer is the presiding genius.

It finished by stating the Egyptians were not be oppressed by centuries of despotism, but rather by Cromer's rule. (pp. 48-9)

Certainly among those opposing the decision of Denshawai, George Bernard Shaw may have been the harshest. In the opening to his play *John Bull's Other Island*, in a section called "The Denshawai Horror", he asked the audience to:

Try to imagine the feelings of an English village if a party of Chinese officers suddenly appeared and began shooting the ducks, the geese, the hens and the turkeys and carried them off, asserting that they were wild birds as everyone in China knew, and that the pretended indignation of the farmers was a cloak for the hatred of the Chinese, and perhaps for a plot to overthrow the religion of Confucius and establish the Church of England in its place! (Shaw, xlvi)

Cromer continued to be attacked. Liberal John Mackinnon Robertson questioned his actions, suggesting "the great deeds of Lord Cromer were no reason for permitting under his control acts of mere revenge..." (Owen, 337-8) As pressure increased on colonial policy, and his health deteriorated, Cromer decided to retire. A year later, he lamented the decision to punish by flogging and hanging as "unduly severe," (Lloyd, 47) but his Orientalist views of Egyptians never changed. He wrote a scathing report of them in *Modern Egypt*, belittled them in a piece written for the *Edinburgh Review* called "The Government of Subject Races", and finally wrote Abbas II about the recently deposed Khedive with whom Cromer had many battles. But the overall opinion within England eventually sided with Blunt. As Valentine Chirol, a British reporter from London concluded a decade and a half later:

"The lamentable Denshawi incident is not forgotten to the present day. The extreme severity of the judicial retribution that followed an affray between ignorant, if brutal, villagers and a small party of British officers out shooting was honestly regarded by most

Egyptians, and not only by Egyptians, as needlessly vindictive. No Englishman can read the story of the wretched men's execution without a qualm of compunction. Trivial grievances, often of a personal character, help to explain the increasing jealousy of British ascendancy in the newly-education classes and especially amongst Egyptian officials, but it is Denshawai that rankled in the memory of the *fellaheen*. (Chirol, 93)

The opposition to Denshawai not surprisingly was felt more strongly in Egypt. Some supporters of Cromer criticized the former Consul-General, suggesting that his opinions of Egyptians were drawn from the *fellaheen* rather than educated Egyptians. Sir John Eldon Gorst replaced Cromer as Consul-General, and almost immediately reversed two important policies involved in the stereotyping of Egyptians and the peasants. More Egyptians began to work within the administration of the colony, and Gorst no longer used the *Egyptian Gazette* as a bullhorn for British colonial policy. (Marshall 24) A year after the Denshawai Incident, the surviving offenders were released from prison and returned to their village. But the Orientalist view of the Egyptians had done its damage: seven nationalist parties formed in Egypt following Denshawai, each with the intention in driving the imperialists from their native land. The Egyptians never forgot the Denshawai Incident: in his speech nationalizing the Suez Canal from 1956, Nasser called it a chance to remove the demons of Denshawai. Twenty years later, President Anwar Sadat wrote in his autobiography *In Search of Identity* how his grandmother would recall Denshawai and one of the hanged peasants, Mohammed Zarhan. It was due to this story, he recalled, that he learned to hate the British. (Sadat, 5) Finally, memories of Denshawai echoed through the protests at Tarir

Square this past year, as people chanted “Denshawai!” at the police and military personnel assigned to eliminate opposition to President Hosni Mubarak’s rule.

Edward Said argued Western Europe’s defining of the “Orient” was centuries old, and said more about themselves rather than the peoples they described. The stereotypes constructed about the *fellaheen* of Egypt grew harsher in the nineteenth century. Starting with the Napoleonic Expedition of 1798, descriptions of this exotic land and its people grew more derogatory, and by the late 1800s created this self-important idea of doing God’s work in civilizing the Orient. This view became a part of colonial policy and justice towards the *fellaheen*. This contradiction culminated in The Denshawai Incident: a trial not of villagers frustrated with British officers hunting pigeons for sport, but evil, conniving, untrustworthy villagers who organized a premeditated attack on innocent Englishmen.

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