



Kitchener as Proconsul of Egypt, 1911–1914 by George H. Cassar.

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Professor George Cassar (Eastern Michigan Univ.) is a notable and prolific military historian, author of several books on the British army, and an expert on Kitchener.¹ His *Kitchener as Proconsul of Egypt* is an old-fashioned book, but neither dated nor devoid of interest. Far from it. At a time when admiration for empire, especially the British Empire, and biography is much in vogue, a study of one of the great worthies of the Empire, the compelling and controversial Horatio Herbert Lord Kitchener, is greatly welcome.

The author's admiration for Kitchener and his military and administrative exploits comes through loud and clear. The man's career spanned almost the entire history of the modern British Empire. He served briefly in India and aspired to the most exalted position in Britain's imperial legacy—Viceroy of India. World War I ended that ambition when he died aboard the armored cruiser HMS *Hampshire* after it struck a German mine and sank just west of the Orkney Islands (5 June 1916).

Kitchener had manifold ties to Egypt, which was, after India, Britain's most vital possession. He held top positions in the Egyptian military, including *Sirdar* or commanding officer of the army, and was responsible for the conquest of Sudan in 1898. He became Britain's Consul-General in Egypt in 1911. The characteristic energy he brought to his administrative work made him more successful than his predecessors, the disappointing Sir Eldon Gorst (1907–11) and the model proconsul Lord Cromer (1883–1907). Kitchener held the position until the outbreak of war in Europe, when he became Britain's War Secretary (1914–16).

The tenures of Cromer and Gorst as Consuls-General are well documented in numerous general studies of the British occupation of Egypt as well as exemplary biographies of both men. However, Kitchener's brief time as Consul-General and virtual ruler of Egypt has remained a lacuna in our understanding of the British occupation of Egypt (1882–1914). George Cassar has now filled this gap admirably.

Once the First World War began, Britain did away with the fiction that Egypt was still a semi-autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire, that their agent in Egypt was merely a Consul-General, rather than de facto ruler, and that the presence of the British garrison in the country was temporary. Instead, the British established a protectorate over the country that lasted until 1923, when violent nationalist pressures induced them to grant the country its nominal independence even while reserving considerable powers to themselves.

Though he was only a mediocre battlefield tactician, Kitchener honed his talents as a superb, even charismatic, leader of men during his long military career. These qualities were much in evidence during his stint as Consul-General as well. No doubt his imposing (six-foot, two-inch) stature and commanding if sometimes aloof personality gave him an authority absent in his immediate predecessor,

1. He has written two previous works on him: *Kitchener: Architect of Victory* (London: W. Kimber, 1977) and *Kitchener's War: British Strategy from 1914 to 1916* (Washington: Brassey's, 2004). A promised further volume will concern his Middle Eastern involvement as War Secretary during the First World War.

the short, bespectacled Gorst. Moreover, Kitchener went to Egypt in the wake of a perceived alarming upswing in anti-British and nationalist sentiments that had troubled the last years of Cromer's administration and all of Gorst's. Both men had left their positions in ill health, apparently worn out by the very demanding task of administering a strategically important country with complex ties to Europe and the Ottoman Empire. Cromer's overbearing personality had left no space for Egyptian initiatives, while Gorst's efforts to accommodate moderate Egyptian nationalists yielded few results. Gorst had made a bad mistake in currying favor with the Egyptian Khedive, Abbas II (r. 1892–1914), who had crossed swords with Cromer and even Kitchener when he was head of the Egyptian army. Gorst's endeavor to befriend Abbas came too late to appease a man the British had regularly humiliated.

Kitchener intended to sideline Abbas, but a few years of dealing with the Khedive's intrigues made him contemplate deposing him. At first he received no support from the liberal British government, where Lord Grey headed the Foreign Office, but eventually even the ever-patient Grey tired of Abbas's activities and was ready to remove the recalcitrant ruler. World War I saved the British government from carrying out an act that would have provoked a strong nationalist response. The entry of the Ottoman Empire on the side of the Central Powers offered them a perfect opportunity to remove Abbas and proclaim a protectorate over Egypt.

Cassar's treatment of Kitchener's four years as Consul-General is well researched and engagingly written. In particular, he astutely clarifies two issues that have long perplexed historians of modern Egypt. The first is the five-feddan law, which Kitchener introduced to allow peasants to borrow money without risking their lands as surety for loans. The banks, Cromer in England, and the Foreign Office objected that such protections against peasant extravagance would only lead to feckless financial behavior and undermine the financial stability of the new, British-run Egyptian National Bank. Cassar's close reading of Foreign Office correspondence and the private papers of Lord Grey, Edward Cecil, and Lady Salisbury,² leads him to conclude that the program, despite its novelty and start-up flaws, proved a success.

The second point at issue is Britain's abortive effort to replace the Capitulations, which accorded significant privileges to foreigners living in Egypt. These comprised the right not to have their houses entered even during criminal investigations unless authorized by their foreign consuls, the right to have personal issues litigated in consular courts, and the right to have most civil and commercial cases adjudicated in courts known as Mixed Tribunals, staffed by foreign and Egyptian judges, mostly selected by foreign consuls.

All three British Consuls-General who ruled Egypt during the occupation were convinced that the Capitulations made a smoothly functioning government impossible. Kitchener, with his usual élan and optimism believed he could do what his predecessors had failed to. But his efforts miscarried, not for want of resolve, but because of French opposition—despite the Anglo-French agreement of 1904 that recognized France's predominance in Morocco in return for its ceasing to harass Britain's control of Egypt. The 1904 agreement was also a prelude to the Triple Entente, which obligated the British, French, and Russians to come to one another's defense.

A final word of caution: Cassar is an unabashed fan of Kitchener, though he occasionally mentions his limitations, notably shyness and stiffness. Nonetheless, he concedes that Kitchener was persona non grata among members of Britain's Liberal Party because of what they regarded as overly aggressive acts during his military career, particularly the slaughter of more than ten thousand Mahdist soldiers during the Sudanese campaign and his despoiling of the Mahdi's grave to avenge the killing of Gen.

2. Widow of Britain's famous Prime Minister and head of the Foreign Office and a lifelong friend of Kitchener.

Charles “Chinese” Gordon, an idol of Kitchener’s youth. Although these deeds earned him the nickname “butcher of the Sudan,” Cassar whitewashes his atrocities, blaming instead the “fanatical” Muslim warriors for mounting massed charges against a well-armed and disciplined Egyptian army. There is no sustained discussion of the validity of the negative characterization of Kitchener. In addition, Cassar gratuitously disparages not only Sudanese warriors but also Egyptian radical nationalists like Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Shawish, repeatedly calling them fanatics.

Despite these reservations, *Kitchener as Proconsul of Egypt* is a salutary, meticulously documented, and compelling study of a neglected period in the history of British suzerainty in Egypt.