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**Hanna, Nelly. *In Praise of Books: A Cultural History of Cairo's Middle Class, Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003. Pp. ix + 219. US\$19.95 (paper). ISBN: 0-8156-3036-0.**

**Reviewed by Paul Brykczynski, University of Michigan**

Nelly Hanna's *In Praise of Books: A Cultural History of Cairo's Middle Class, from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, is an interesting and provocative book with a somewhat misleading title. In fact, the book is not so much a cultural history of Cairo's middle class but an argument that a distinctly middle-class culture existed in Cairo during the early modern period. More than half of the book (three out of five chapters) is concerned with making the case that a "middle class" with its own distinct outlook and culture is a meaningful subject of study in the context of early modern Egypt. This is by no means a simple task. In traditional historiography, Egyptian society has generally been portrayed as being split between a small educated elite of religious scholars (*'ulema*) and military administrators, on the one hand, and the illiterate "masses" on the other. Intellectual historians of the Arab world have traditionally focused their energies on the *'ulema*, while the masses were left largely to fields of social or economic history. At best, historians may have looked at the non-literary popular culture of the masses.

*In Praise of Books* works to break down this traditional dichotomy. Hanna begins her discussion with a social history of early modern Egypt and persuasively argues for the existence of a large stratum of the population that was not part of the religious or military elite, but which possessed disposable income, some education, and could not be considered a part of the masses. While one may hesitate to use the term "middle class" in reference to this group of pre-capitalist merchants, artisans, minor scholars, and petty officials, Hanna argues that it is the term "class," rather than "estate," that captures this group's fluid character and potential for social mobility.

But does the existence of a class in the economic sense necessarily imply a degree of shared consciousness or experience, something which would be necessary for a meaningful discussion of middle-class *culture*? According to traditional historiography, insofar as members of the Egyptian middle class possessed an education, this education was entirely religious. Hanna, however, argues that in the sixteenth century, many members of the middle class developed a literate culture that differed in many respects from that of the dominant religious culture.

While most of her arguments are persuasive, some of Hanna's methodology may be questioned. For example, on the basis of studies of other parts of the Mediterranean world, she argues for a causal relationship between the increase of trade and the spread of literacy to the middle classes. But this

argument suffers from two obvious problems. First, as Hanna herself writes earlier in the book, Egypt's trade reached its zenith in the early sixteenth century when Cairo's near-monopoly on the spice trade was broken by the Portuguese (29). How, then, can Hanna attribute rising literacy rates among the Egyptian middle class in the seventeenth century to trade, which most likely never reached sixteenth-century levels (57-58)? Moreover, most of the comparative studies on which she draws are from southern Europe where the development of the printing press must have had an impact on rising literacy rates. But the printing press was not used in Egypt until the nineteenth century, which causes some doubts regarding the validity of the comparison.

The issue of the printing press is addressed only later in the book, and constitutes one of the work's most provocative and insightful chapters. The traditional assumption of historiography is that the printing press had an enormous impact on the spread of literacy in Europe and that its absence in the Middle East can explain the lower rates of literacy and book ownership in the region. However, by examining inheritance records, Hanna is able to show that the price of (manually transcribed) books in early modern Egypt was not as prohibitive as scholars generally assume. She also persuasively argues that many members of the middle class owned private libraries and, more importantly, that their share of the total number of private libraries rose continually through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in proportion to the growing economic clout of the middle class. By the early eighteenth century, almost a third of all libraries were owned by members of the middle class (98). Hence, according to Hanna, in Egypt, the book was not simply the property of elites. Despite the absence of the printing press, the book market was subject to the laws of supply and demand, and a growing middle-class demand led to an increase in the number of books being transcribed.

This argument, while generally persuasive, could benefit from further elaboration and contextualization. For example, Hanna's data on book ownership, which are based on inheritance records, provides us with the number of libraries owned by members of the middle class in relation to those owned by other classes. But what percentage of middle-class homes actually contained a library? Answering this question would allow the reader to gauge the penetration of literary culture among Cairo's middle classes, and compare it to the situation in regions where the printing press was a factor. Only then could the importance of the printing press for the emergence of a middle-class literary culture be meaningfully discussed.

The most disappointing chapters of the book, however, are those dealing with the actual content of Egyptian middle-class culture. The main problem is that Hanna systematically analyzes the works of only one "middle-class" writer, Muhammad Ibn Hassan Abu Thakir (1694-1765). Historians must always be careful when designating the potentially idiosyncratic thoughts of a single individual as the expression of a larger group or class. This problem can be avoided to some extent if we are able to notice similar patterns replicating themselves in the works of numerous writers originating from a similar background. While Hanna's treatment of Abu Thakir is insightful, it suffers from the obvious problem of being the only case she examines in depth. While Hanna mentions the arguments of other authors, their works are not subjected to the same sustained analysis. To provide the reader with a "cultural history of Cairo's middle class" in the full meaning of the term, it would be necessary to examine the work of Abu Thakir's middle-class contemporaries, as well as that of his forbears and successors. As it is, we simply cannot know whether Abu Thakir's writings were representative of the middle class as a whole, or even of some of its members. Perhaps they represent little more than the musings of a single man disenchanted with his failed career. The texts of other writers mentioned in the book are not examined in enough detail to give us an accurate impression of their identity or thought.

In summary, Hanna's book is both insightful and provocative but, in many respects, it leaves the reader unsatisfied. While it makes a persuasive case for the existence of a middle-class culture in early modern Cairo, and examines the social, economic, and educational basis of that class, it does not actually tell us enough about its cultural history. Nonetheless, Hanna's achievement is considerable. *In Praise of*

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*Books* will certainly draw other scholars to the study of this new and exciting topic, and expand on Hanna's pioneering research.