

## **Review: Cultivating the Nile: The Everyday of Politics of Water in Egypt**

By Jessica Barnes

**Reviewed by Ryder W. Miller**

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Barnes, Jessica. *Cultivating the Nile, The Everyday Politics of Water in Egypt*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014. 248 pp. ISBN: 9780822357414, cloth, \$US 89.95; ISBN 9780822357568, paper, US\$ 23.95. Illustrated.

*Cultivating the Nile* is a fascinating ethnography by Jessica Barnes about her exploration of water issues in North Africa. She chose to focus on the Fayoum Tributary of the Nile which is south of Cairo and where the Nile delta empties into the Mediterranean from Egypt. As such it is a separate system that does not reach the sea. Barnes, of The University of South Carolina, took more than five years to research and write this tale about the efforts that are underway and the troubles involved in bringing water to farmers there. The book is mostly about water, not a lot here about pollution, global warming, or biodiversity. As such, one is in store for a focused exploration of the troubles and turmoil that the Egypt farmer faces.

Presently water is still a right. It has become an international issue and could become contentious enough that military action might result from unresolved problems. The book does explore how other nations are involved in the plight of these farmers with international efforts being made to build dams further up the Nile. Most of *Cultivating the Nile* is a close analysis of the many factors involved in understanding Egypt's water. A lot of this tale is grassroots, but in some chapters the author does go up the chain of power to also see what other factors are involved.

Much of Barnes' exploration into the problems farmers face in Egypt is insightful. She attends meetings where the constituents try to make their needs known to decision makers. The political process is problematic with some farmers not being happy with how the decisions are being made. There are also interesting things said here about the goals of international investments in the area. The very technology used is explored here with Barnes exploring the technological infrastructure that is involved in getting the water from the dams and river to the farm fields. She argues that we need to understand these systems to understand what is meant by Egypt's water. She is strident pointing out that it is not all about rainfall and access to the Nile. Instead, one must also improve the systems that are available. In doing so, one is making the situation more beneficial for the poor farmers who don't have all the capital and resources they need, and not enough power, even in groups, to solve their personal problem.

This is a great book for those who are interested in learning more about water politics and dynamics. Sadly, there are not a lot of recommendations for Egypt to solve these problems. The book is also a response by a scholar who did not have a voice in

Egyptian politics yet. Egyptian decision makers can probably figure out the problem on their own, but this book will supply them with some important questions. The author forces us to think more closely about the political, technological, and ecological understandings we have of water and water systems. We are reminded about how important it is. The book is also easy to read and does not have a lot of jargon even though the situation is complicated with the author pointing out that “A complex set of social, biophysical, technical, and political processes, operating on a range of scales, mold the course of the river’s water.” (P. 169)

The book is emotional and inspiring and is recommended for the activist, scholar, planner, student, and journalist. It is an interesting cross-cultural experience and one is likely to care about such things after reading it.

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