

*The Economic History of the Middle East: 1800-1914. A Book of Readings* edited by Charles Issawi. Chicago : University of Chicago Press. Pp. 513.

This book has a wide selection of writings on various topics of the Middle East economy, of which some refer mainly to events lying a little outside the given period. The Middle East here consists of the Ottoman Empire, Iraq, Syria, Arabia, Egypt and the Sudan. Syria includes the Lebanon, Palestine and Trans-Jordan, whilst Arabia means the whole Arabian Peninsula. These writings are culled from a remarkable array of sources, ranging from diaries to diplomatic reports. The editor has deliberately avoided the better-known works in English and has endeavoured to present the reader with a selection of which he might never see the originals and has done so in a comprehensive and unified manner.

The book starts with a general introduction, but each section of the book deals with a region and has its own introduction or introductory selection. The general introduction gives a broad view of the economy of the Middle East since the beginning of the millennium and ends with a brief account of the progress made since the beginning of the upswing in the early 19th Century.

Next section includes such topics as the vicissitudes of commerce and the handicrafts, changes in agriculture, railways, the Ottoman Debt, the burden of taxation and the ethnic division of labour under the Ottoman Empire. Turkey attempted, much earlier than Czarist Russia, to industrialise by heavy borrowing, but with the disadvantage that, by the terms of the Anglo-Turkish Commercial Convention of 1838, protection could not be provided to its industries whilst foreigners could escape even the internal duties. The Convention is a text-book example of economic imperialism and had the effect one would expect of ruining the native artisans. Borrowing from abroad became a vice and the Sublime Porte was obliged to pledge the revenues of certain taxes as security, and eventually conceded part of its sovereignty in allowing the whole revenue system to come under partial foreign control.

Iraq offers a classic illustration of the difficulties besetting a country with a large tribal population. Attempts by ambitious governors to settle the population broke on their imperfect understanding of the actual problems. The construction of the Suez Canal helped by providing a market for Iraq's wheat and cotton, thereby encouraging commercial farming. Selections are given on these matters and on railways, river shipping and the struggles for oil concessions.

Syria was probably economically the most advanced of the regions at the start. Its handicraft industry was, however, destroyed by the same causes as Turkey's and its farms suffered from having to bear the burden of paying the

taxes and the debts. Nevertheless, agriculture was introduced into new areas by government schemes, in a manner reminiscent of the American prairies, and cotton weaving and silk reeling factories grew up without state subsidies.

Arabia's economic development was by and large negative. Coastal trade was reduced by the competition of the British sailing boats and the trading ports either declined or depended on pilgrims; but interesting excerpts are given in the book on pearl-fishing, Yemeni Jews, the nomadic economy and international rivalries in the Persian Gulf.

In Egypt there was a real attempt at industrialisation. From 1805 to 1849, Mohammad Ali, spurred on by ambition, forced the nation to save, invest and plan. By systematic organisation of production, taxation and monopolies, he managed to regulate almost every detail of production in the industries he established. Also, it was during Mohammad Ali's reign that Jumel Cotton was introduced, that land reforms were made and Egypt remained out of debt. His successors failed to keep the country free of debt and the eventual bankruptcy reduced the nation to a colony. The selections on Egypt include all this. However it is a pity that there is no selection on the Suez Canal.

Finally, there is a section on the Sudan, whose economy could not move above the subsistence level on account of widespread anarchy and turmoil. Mohammad Ali, lured by illusory prospects of revenue from gold and slaves, invaded and conquered the Sudan. Though the Egyptians brought some order and peace to the area, the system of taxes they imposed on the Sudanese was too harsh and iniquitous to be accepted without protest. The Mehdist revolt destroyed Egyptian power. Some development took place under the British in the 19th Century. But the real achievement was the Gezira Scheme in the 20th century. From this stemmed the true commercialisation of Sudanese agriculture.

The book ends with a rather sanguine description of changes more recent than 1914. Issawi distinguishes between three shifts of power: from foreign to national interest; from landed to business interests, and from the private to the public sector. It is in these shifts that he sees the determinants of the subsequent development of the Middle Eastern economy.

The book forms a very interesting and judiciously compiled selection of unusual material. It should be interesting reading for the layman, the economist and the historian.