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Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. xvii + 402 pp. Appendix, notes, bibliography, and index. $17.50 US (pb). ISBN 0-231-10661-0.

Review by Mary C. Wilson, University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

From 1922 until 1943, France ruled Syria and Lebanon under a new *League of Nations* category of imperial control, that of mandate. Mandates were awarded to the powers on the winning side of World War I in order to dispose of the defeated powers' non-European territories. Austria-Hungary was divided into linguistically based states that did not become mandates. German colonies and the Arabic-speaking provinces of the Ottoman Empire were awarded to Britain or France as mandates reflecting a bias at the peace conference that deemed non-Europeans incapable of self-government. It was the duty of the mandatory powers to set up governing structures and to train their mandated subjects in the art of self-government. They did so according to their own preferences. Britain favored constitutional monarchies. France set up the framework of a republic in both Syria and Lebanon and then subverted it, through direct intervention or on behalf of its favored local intermediaries, in order to maintain the upper hand in all political decisions and the economic and social policies contingent upon them.

Elizabeth Thompson, an associate professor of Middle East history at the University of Virginia, looks at this process of state formation as the construction of a civic order. By looking at the place in this new civic order of subaltern groups--women, workers, and non-elite Muslims--she breaks away from other studies of mandatory Syria and Lebanon in English that focus on nationalist movements led by an elite group of urban notables. The results I would say are mixed, owing partly to a lack of evidence and partly to conclusions not warranted by the evidence provided.

Thompson begins with an eloquent chapter on World War I--the British blockade of the coast and the Ottoman requisitioning of men, animals, and foodstuffs--that resulted in death, famine, and dislocation in Syria and Lebanon during the war. Famine casualties exceeded military ones, and death rates far exceeded those in Europe. France and Germany lost less than 5 per cent of their prewar populations; Syria and Lebanon between 12 and 18 percent. This, and the defeat and dismantling of the Ottoman state, caused, according to Thompson, a "crisis of paternity." She defines this crisis in several ways. It is the struggle between France and Arab nationalists to sire the new states that would replace Ottoman authority in Syria and Lebanon. It is a crisis of paternal authority in the home and community stemming from the inability of fathers, community leaders, and the state to protect and provide for their families, communities, and citizens during the war. It is a "general crisis of authority and gender identity in the realm of politics" (p. 38).

The crisis of paternity was played out in the mandate period in the struggle for control of the state and over the definition of citizens' rights and the distribution of state benefits. France shared its position at the top of the paternal hierarchy with its chosen mediating elites: the local political elite, sometimes nationalist and sometimes not, and the religious elite. Challenging this order were some women who created a feminist movement, some workers who created a labor movement, and some non-elite Muslims who created movements of Islamic populism.

Thompson devotes more attention to feminism than to the other two movements and thereby begins to fill a gap in mandate histories. Against a backdrop of increased access to education, she highlights three feminist battles: for the vote, against the veil, and for the "right to go to the movies" (p. 197). Rhetoric produced around all three issues reveals a standard array of conceptions about women's place. Thompson shows that the male elites, who were both vying for control of Syria and Lebanon and trying to maintain their place at the top of a paternalistic civic order, cut deals on the grounds of gender. Thus, for example, secular nationalists gave way to religious leaders on the issues of Muslim women's attendance at the movies and of film censorship in order to gain their support in the political struggle against the French. The French, for their part, did not intervene to change personal status laws because French rule relied on existing elites as mediators with local society. Under the French mandate religious hierarchies regained control of family law that, under the late Ottoman Empire, had gradually been brought under state control and secularized.

What is missing from the chapters on feminism is the sense of immediacy that made Thompson's chapter on World War I so outstanding. The women engaged in these battles and the women for whom they were fought remain abstract. We are given the familiar litany of names of women who published books and magazines and who organized and spoke at meetings and demonstrations, but little that animates these women or the lives they lived. There is no doubt a dearth of sources. Some biographical details could have been gleaned from Khayr al-Din Zirikli's biographical dictionary[1] and from former and present residents of Beirut and Damascus, now in their seventies and eighties, who might divulge the gossip of an era that is quickly passing out of reach of living memory.

Also, except for the highlights of demonstrations and counter demonstrations, the texture of social change is missing. This is especially true of changing habits of dress. Thompson tells us that women in Damascus lifted their veils in political meetings in 1919 and 1922, that a woman published a tract against the veil in Beirut in 1928, and that in 1944 women in Beirut lifted their veils in a demonstration against the French. She also tells us what she thinks these events meant. For example, the latter "were symbolically lifting the veil of paternalism that had distanced them as citizens from direct relations with the state" (p. 258). I would prefer to learn a little about the pace of unveiling from 1919 on and its personal as well as its political meanings. The impression given here is that women flipped their veils sporadically and at politically opportune moments. This may be true, but face veils did gradually disappear.

Thompson's approach to labor and Islamic populism rests on an implicit assumption that there are three classes: the poorer masses/lower classes/impoverished majority, the middle class/ bourgeoisie, and the upper class/elite. While I sympathize with her desire not to get bogged down in definitions, these three cardboard cut-out categories cause her to miss *entrées* into questions about class that would have enlivened her discussion. For example, she mentions a Syrian plan to cut bread prices for the poor to half the rate paid by the middle class, but tells us nothing about how the state proposed to distinguish the poor from the middle class at the bakeries and with what effect.

Thompson defines subaltern groups as groups without direct access to the state. By definition then the purpose of feminism, labor, and Islamic populism in Syria and Lebanon was to gain direct access. Their achievement, in Thompson's analysis, was a colonial welfare state. She states, "By 1939, the accumulation of social rights won had sketched the outlines of a veritable welfare state, albeit one distinguished by its colonial setting" (p. 163). I think this exaggerates short-term colonial tactics meant to win friends and influence people. First, French rule in Syria and Lebanon did not develop an ideology of welfare beyond the standard colonial ideology of the mission civilisatrice. Second, the extension of social legislation and benefits within Syria and Lebanon targeted specific groups and were sporadically applied. There is a misfit here between the examples Thompson cites of piecemeal and unfulfilled social programs and her analysis. Third, the extension of what, in a welfare state, would have been public benefits was often left in private hands. Thus, for example, the increase in educational facilities in

Lebanon rested largely with the Catholic orders, which, though heavily subsidized by the French government, resulted in fee-charging schools that served only part of the national community.

Thompson's insistence on the development of a colonial welfare state in Syria and Lebanon under the French lands her in strange territory. "In sum, the drive toward a democratic welfare state effectively halted after 1943. [Independent] Syria's state paternalism was not state welfarism; [independent] Lebanon's liberal paternalism did not even pretend to be" (p. 284). In other words, Syria and Lebanon, if you believe in the liberal goals of democratic government and welfare, fared better while the French bombed Damascus, imprisoned Lebanese ministers, manipulated elections, and "fostered a neo-feudal landowning class" (p. 53) than they did after independence. Many certainly feel that way today from the vantage of the 1975-1989 Lebanese civil war, but it is a judgment whose horizon is severely limited. I think the better conclusion, and one suggested by Thompson when she is writing about sectarianism, is that the French mandate laid the groundwork for much of what we find so repugnant in the exercise of political power in Syria and Lebanon today.

There is much that is interesting and new in Elizabeth Thompson's work. Although I find her evidence at variance with her analysis in places, her book raises important questions and repays careful reading.

NOTES

[1] Khayr al-Din Zirikli, *al-Alam, qamus tarajim al-ashhur al-rijal wa al-nisa min al-arab wa al-mustarabin wa al-mustashriqin* (Cairo: 1954-1959).

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