

At the Ministry of Education: The School of Languages

al-Siyasa, 16 July 1923

We must congratulate the Ministry of Education, for it has revealed itself in a way that truly deserves congratulation. We must congratulate the Ministry of Education, for it now has an official newspaper of its own, and has, within this official newspaper, official writers who support it and defend it — though what they deserve, behind the transparent titles and descriptions that hide nothing of what lies beneath them... The Ministry of Education now has an official newspaper, but this official newspaper harms the Ministry of Education precisely where it means to do it good. It praises the Ministry of Education, whether deservedly or not, taking no care to be accurate, seeking no genuine benefit in it — indeed, preserving neither its own dignity nor that of the Ministry of Education, and feeling no reluctance at making people laugh at both itself and the Ministry.

Did you read what al-Muqattam published when it announced the results of the primary teachers' examinations? It claimed that the credit for this dazzling success belonged to so-and-so among the Ministry's officials, and praised so-and-so beyond and beneath what he deserved. But it forgot, or made a point of forgetting, that this very so-and-so had only been transferred to primary education the day before, or the day before that, and had not yet had time to oversee it, let alone leave any mark upon it, good or bad. Did you read al-Muqattam's praise on the day it published the results of the qualifying examination — praise distributed so evenly that it landed on people who had had little or no part in the teaching at all: examination chairmen, ministry officials, markers, and so on down the list?! This is how the Ministry of Education wins whatever praise and commendation it pleases — unconcerned whether that praise is deserved or extorted, unconcerned whether it is sincere or absurd, concerned only that the daily papers should praise it, much like some illiterate village headman of a bygone age... This is the point to which the Ministry of Education in Egypt has sunk: it buys its own praise, even at the cost of making itself a laughingstock for anyone who wishes to laugh. How, then, can this Ministry hope to oversee learning and education seriously and productively, when it is more eager for praise and commendation than for genuine benefit and output?

The Ministry of Education, then, has an official newspaper that defends and praises it, and the Ministry lets this official newspaper and its writers in on its own secrets and hidden matters — a courtesy it extends over other newspapers and other writers, because those other newspapers might actually prefer the truth, and those other writers might be sparing in their praise and inclined toward criticism instead. And so they are promised things, and the promises are broken; they ask the Ministry of Education for a statement, and their request goes unheard, and they receive no answer — which is, after all, an ordinary enough thing in human nature, since those overseeing affairs at the Ministry of Education are, like anyone else, people who share in the common failings of weakness and negligence.

The Ministry of Education confides its secrets and inner workings to its official newspaper and its official writers, and publishes in it what they call "quasi-official" communiqués, by which it defends itself against the criticism of critics. We have read, in *al-Muqattam*, an account of the history of the School of Languages, the discussions that took place within it, the meeting that was held in the Minister's office, and the decision reached at that meeting. All of this was published in the confident, assured tone of one who speaks not from personal inclination, but only, as it were, by revelation... Yet, in spite of all this, we doubt the truthfulness of what was published, and believe that the director of the Egyptian Antiquities Service does not, in fact, share the Ministry of Education's view, nor Kamal Pasha's view, on teaching hieroglyphics in this barren manner that readers now know so well. We believe this, and we should like the Ministry of Education to confirm to us that we are mistaken — that the specialists themselves have become entangled with it in this error, and have decided that hieroglyphics should be taught in Egypt in this absurd fashion. If the Ministry of Education confirms to us that we are mistaken, it will not be hard for us to declare openly that the director of the Antiquities Service has taken the wrong path, just as the Ministry of Education has, and has held two contradictory opinions on one and the same question: one in the report of the Royal University, the other at this most recent meeting.

Nor does the Ministry of Education's conduct stop there. It is not content merely to defend itself; it has added to this a defence of Kamal Pasha, as though anyone at all were attacking Kamal Pasha, or describing him in any way he might resent. And in mounting this defence of Kamal Pasha, it follows a crooked path, whose harm outweighs its good, and

whose damage exceeds its benefit. It takes aim at the very Frenchmen who organized the Egyptian Museum and founded the science of Egyptian archaeology, with kinds of insinuation and innuendo we would have preferred not to address at all — since they are unbecoming of dignity, and bring no credit to anyone who indulges in them, especially in days such as these. Nor is it content with disparaging Mariette and Maspero and men like them; it also draws an absurd distinction among Egyptians themselves. It wants to prove — or its mouthpieces want to prove — that Kamal Pasha has been genuinely useful and beneficial, and that the students Egypt takes such pride in are his own graduates. But hold on! Who has ever denied that Kamal has been useful and beneficial? What it claims, however — or what they claim — on behalf of Kamal's own students is more than Kamal's students claim for themselves. They claim, on behalf of Kamal's students, works of authorship and translation that Kamal's own students themselves declare they did not produce alone, but in collaboration with others who never drew hieroglyphics or the science of antiquities from Kamal's own breast, but learned it from someone else entirely. They claim this translation and this authorship as one of Kamal's own achievements, while Kamal's own students themselves acknowledge that whatever they have managed to achieve, its source lies in the two years they spent at the Museum, learning under someone other than Kamal, and following in footsteps other than Kamal's own. When we call for the establishment of a school of antiquities, we are calling, precisely, for the Ministry of Education to follow, in teaching hieroglyphics and archaeology, the very method the Egyptian Museum itself followed when it took in Kamal's students and others besides, and taught them how the hieroglyphic language is studied and how antiquities are studied — a method under which the Museum now wishes to send them on to Europe to complete their studies there.

Yes, we want a school of antiquities to be established on precisely this method. We want the foundation the Museum itself laid down to serve as the basis for this school. We want this school to be housed in the Museum, not in the Teachers' College.

We want this... but the Ministry of Education wants something else, and it may well press ahead with what it wants. But its doing so will change nothing in the matter, and will not make its new school any more useful or beneficial. We continue to insist that the Ministry of Education has already failed, together with Kamal Pasha, at teaching hieroglyphics, and there is no point in repeating that failure. We continue to insist that

the Ministry of Education has attended to one thing with an inadequate attention, while neglecting another thing entirely. It has attended to the Pharaonic age and neglected the Islamic age. Its attention to the Pharaonic age is inadequate, and does no good — yet the Islamic age, the glory of Islam, the art of Islam: all of these deserve, at the very least, this same inadequate attention from the Ministry of Education, if inadequate attention is all we are to be given. We should like the Ministry of Education to answer us: why is it in such a hurry to teach the hieroglyphic language, while giving no thought whatsoever to the study of Islamic antiquities?

They will say: what of the Tutankhamun antiquities, and the sensation they have caused? No — the Ministry of Education, like every other ministry, has paid these antiquities no real attention. It is enough to know that these antiquities, though on display in the Museum, have not to this day received any official visit at all — they were visited only by Marshal Allenby and his wife! There are, besides, Islamic antiquities that have come to light and have their own real value, antiquities that have stirred real interest in Europe and in Egypt — yet the man who brought them to light was not an Englishman, but an Egyptian like you and me: Bahgat Bey, not Carter, and not Carnarvon. There is Fustat, brought to light, on which a book, or more than one, has been written, and to which Europeans have devoted real attention — while we ourselves remain in total ignorance of it. And what greater ignorance could there be than that this book, or these books, should have been written in French, printed in Europe, and remain, to this day, written in French, never translated into Arabic?! There is no doubt whatsoever that this book, or these books, possess an indisputable scholarly and technical value. So what has the Ministry of Education done to attend to this book, or these books, or to Fustat itself — when translating this book into Arabic and publishing it for the people would cost the Ministry of Education not a tenth of what it will cost to print the dictionary Kamal Pasha has compiled, whose scholarly value we do not yet even know?

We should like the Ministry of Education to answer us: why does it attend to one thing while neglecting another entirely? We do not doubt that this neglect of Islamic antiquities did not arise from any contempt for them; we are, rather, entirely confident that it arose, on the one hand, from narrowness of vision, and, on the other, from the exploitation of public sentiment. Narrowness of vision, because the Ministry of Education's mind is too small to accommodate the idea of establishing a

general school of antiquities encompassing every era of Egypt's history alike. Exploitation of public sentiment, because people have heard of these newly-discovered Egyptian antiquities and have wished their government to attend to Egyptian antiquities, and the Ministry of Education exploits this wish so that people will say: it is bowing to the will of the nation, fulfilling the nation's benefit. But people know that bowing to the will of the nation must be genuine, not distorted, and that those who attempt to fulfil the nation's benefit must fulfil it completely, not by half-measures.

So, then, if Your Excellency the Minister truly wishes to bow to the will of the nation by attending to Egyptian antiquities and Egyptian art, let this be done rightly and beneficially. Let it take the form of establishing a general school of antiquities, overseen by capable scholars of antiquities, and taught by learned professors of the subject. Let it take the form of establishing this general school, which students may attend to specialize in its various disciplines, and which the public may attend to learn, of Egypt's history, Egypt's art, and Egypt's glory, whatever might improve their own opinion of Egypt. Let it take that form — not the form of a single course in hieroglyphics and an afternoon visit to the Egyptian Museum, for that is nothing but a trifling with people's minds, and a deception of the public out of its own rights and interests.

We return, once again, to draw Your Excellency's attention to this: if you wish to raise a building, then lay its foundation and begin from the bottom, not the top. Establish a Department of Fine Arts and Letters; entrust its affairs to specialists; and then charge those specialists with establishing, for you, the general school of antiquities. Only then will you truly be of use, and only then will you truly hit upon what is right.