

## Foreword

THIS SPECIAL ISSUE devoted to Egypt—the world’s most charismatic, yet confounding, country—was the brainchild of Jules Chametzky, MR’s recently retired founder and eminence grise. We all owe him, plus his initial collaborator, photographer Robert Lyons, along with new editor David Lenson, Managing Editor Corwin Ericson and the rest of the staff of the magazine a great deal of gratitude. But most of all, we should thank Egypt, the glamorous, poverty-stricken, sometimes neglected and often misunderstood *raison d’être* for what you are reading right now. It is a land that, despite enormous fascination in America (and the planet) for centuries, has remained stubbornly—and most often pleurably—mysterious.

Certainly, the horrendous events of the past few months have brought Egypt and the Middle East more into the public eye in the U.S. and elsewhere, while focusing enormous attention on its current political and religious feelings. But what really inspires this issue is an eternal fascination and affection for the country, its monuments, its history, and its people. This fascination has transcended all crises since the ancient Greeks invented Egyptomania nearly three thousand years ago.

It was Jules, sometime in 1997, who proposed to Robert Lyons, an experienced Egypt hand, that he try to put together images and articles about the country for an issue dedicated wholly to this oldest and most absorbing of the world’s civilizations. Jules and Robert had known each other for many years through Robert’s mentor from his days at Hampshire College, Jerome Liebling. Robert enthusiastically agreed to help assemble images (which he did most ably), and he turned to me to gather the written material for the issue. Though it took some time, due to conflicting schedules and the fact that we dwell on different continents (Robert was and is based in Seattle, while I had already lived in Cairo for about a decade), to make a plan of action, and even more to carry it out, I was more than glad to oblige.

Happily, in the end, so were numerous fine contributors, as well. They are, without exception, among the most distinguished, talented, and unselfish people who could be found to write and photograph for this labor of love devoted to what so many feel is the most compelling place on earth.

I have known Robert (who relinquished his role as guest co-editor for photography due to pressing personal business as the issue was nearing completion), since the day in July 1990 when he came into the office where I then worked at the American University in Cairo Press, with an unusual book project in mind. Robert hoped to persuade Naguib Mahfouz, Egypt's Nobel laureate in literature, to contribute a yet-untranslated story of his own to accompany some of Robert's photos from throughout the country. Both Mahfouz and the AUC Press (Mahfouz's literary agents) agreed, and the book appeared in 1992 as *Egyptian Time*, published by Mahfouz's own editor at Doubleday/Anchor Books in New York, the late Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.

As Robert sought a translator for that project, I suggested Peter Theroux, whose translation of Abdel-Rahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* trilogy (later quintet) had greatly impressed me. Peter—whom I didn't then know, but who, like Robert, later became a close friend—duly signed on. *Egyptian Time* was so visually stunning that its legendarily reclusive editor, in one of her very few public appearances in later years, came to its official launch at the International Center for Photography-Midtown in October 1992. And the text was so sensitively rendered that JKO apparently suggested to the AUC Press that Peter undertake a new translation of Mahfouz's controversial novel, *Awlad haratina* (*Children of the Alley*)—which appeared in 1996. The rest is explained in Peter's equally expressive essay in this issue on that novel—for which its author was stabbed almost fatally 35 years after it first appeared.

Every day, and for thousands of years, Egypt has created and creates such eclectic connections among its millions of admirers, from every nationality, color and creed. The issue now in your hand aims not only to please those who have already developed a taste for things Egyptian, or have Egypt in their blood (much

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as Jeffrey Hammond, in his wonderful essay “Egypt Land,” had grown up in America hopelessly enamored with the land of the Pharaohs). It also seeks to mint new Egyptomaniacs—though Egypt herself has managed to do this without much help since the days of Herodotus, and long before.

We have tried to do this by covering as many aspects of the nation’s history and culture as possible. And, given the budgetary limits of a non-profit literary/arts magazine, and the largely voluntary nature of this work, it has come close to achieving this very ambitious goal. Our list of contributors (besides the already-cited Hammond, Lyons, and Theroux), as well as their subjects, illustrates this well.

Starting alphabetically, they include Brooke Comer, whose short story blends the eye of the travel writer with a touching, eccentric empathy for Peter Warg, a dying expat friend, while her poetry here is an oblique critique of the Egyptologist’s art; Linda Connor, like Robert Lyons, one of a half a handful of photographers who have captured part of Egypt’s soul though not resident in the country; Zahi Hawass, Egypt’s most famous archaeologist; Barry Iverson, one of half a handful of photographers who have captured part of Egypt’s soul while long *resident* in the country; Christoph Kapeller, who, among other things, contributed the most striking feature to the outstanding design of the new library of Alexandria (its roof); M. Akif Kirecci, a native of Turkey who is one of the most promising scholars of Arabic literature in the U.S.; Naguib Mahfouz, Egypt’s most revered writer, period; Peter Marin, authority on sand, sex and literature; Bojana Mojsov, a Macedonian historian of ancient Egyptian art blessed with an exceptional literary sensibility, as shown by her essay on the tomb of Sety I; Julian Reilly, whose verse combines the superior diction of the Anglo-Irish diplomat (which he is) with the rich but austere reverie of the Coptic monk (which he is not); John Rodenbeck, perhaps the foremost expert on the cultural history of Alexandria; Ali Salem, Egypt’s most controversial humorist; Ahdaf Soueif, arguably the most respected Egyptian expatriate writer in English, and one of the most gifted in any language; and Caroline Williams, among the

best-known advocates for preserving Egypt's stunning but ever-endangered Islamic architectural heritage.

In the end, we managed to cover a lot of ground—from Pharaonic to modern Egypt, in fiction, non-fiction and poetry, and even the idea of Egypt to someone who has never been there. One of our omissions has been one of the most basic, however—the Coptic side of Egyptian life. Though serious effort was made to include it, along with works on countless other subjects innate to Egypt, we can only hope that our readers will forgive this lamentable lacuna.

There was nearly another monumental absence, as well—the day that changed the world, just two and a half months before we were to go to press. Most of our material was solicited long before 9/11—the issue was essentially closed by the time the World Trade Towers fell, a fifth of the Pentagon burned, and a handful of heroes diverted the fourth plane from another national target to an empty field in Pennsylvania. To our rescue came Mohamed Saleh, one of Egypt's finest concert pianists, who works at the Cairo Opera House. Mohamed had sent a letter to Brooke Comer expressing his horror at what happened in that dreadful morning on a golden day last September—whose weather had begun like a fair day in Egypt. He has allowed us to print it here. We are proud to do so, with our thanks. While, for a variety of reasons, his views are not necessarily typical among his compatriots, we have found them refreshing, and deeply kind.

And there are other, more personal absences, to observe. This issue is dedicated to one person who fortunately is still very much with us—Naguib Mahfouz, who turned 90 on December 10, 2001. The ongoing traumas is the U.S., Afghanistan, and the Middle East, however, have prevented the expected mass celebrations of this historic event. Yet it is also dedicated not only to the victims of all those horrors, but to five other persons as well, all close to one or another of our editors and contributors, who are no longer among us. Each is an individual whose passing deserves special attention here—some because they have not received their due elsewhere.

One of them, Ruth Ketler, was the partner of Robert Dow,

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one of MR's fiction editors, who lost her life in the WTC on September 11. The others, besides the already-mentioned Peter Warg, include Dr. Ragheb Moftah, the famous Coptic musicologist, who died in Alexandria at midnight on June 16/17, 2001 at the age of 102. Born in Cairo's Faggalah district on December 21, 1898, as a boy Ragheb became enamored of the traditional music of the Coptic Orthodox Church. After studying agricultural science in Germany, he met the colorful English ethnomusicologist, Ernest Newlandsmith in Cairo in 1926. Financed by Moftah, the two men spent months on a Nile houseboat together, recording the chants of the Coptic liturgy, some of which are thought to have their origins in hymns to Isis and Osiris performed in ancient Egyptian temples. For the next seven decades, Moftah pioneered the taping and transcription of these timeless songs, as head of the music department of the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies in Cairo. I had the honor of interviewing 'Amm Ragheb (Uncle Ragheb) and his niece, Laurence Moftah (an AUC librarian and the keeper of his flame), on videotape for a Library of Congress oral history project as part of its World Heritage series, the LOC's first such undertaking in the Middle East. To mark his 100th birthday, Coptic Pope Shenouda III celebrated a mass attended by roughly a thousand persons at the Abbasiyah Cathedral. A gentle, indefatigable, and ingenious soul who worked until his final illness a few weeks before his death, Ragheb will be greatly missed by many in Egypt and around the world. (You can read more about him on a variety of websites by searching the Internet under "Coptic Music," or under his name.)

Compounding this tragedy, Ragheb's second cousin, 84 year-old Abdullah Moftah, his distinguished family's unofficial historian, was struck by a car while leaving Ragheb's also-crowded funeral at the cathedral. He died the following day, on June 19. His loss seems especially cruel.

But the cruelty doesn't end there. Asa Nichols Hale, a graduate of Yale who had spent roughly a decade studying Arabic and Kaswahili language and literature in Egypt and East Africa toward a doctorate from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, died an apparent suicide in Cairo on March 28, 2001, aged 36. A regular

at Mahfouz's former weekly nadwah (literary salon) at the Casino Qasr el-Nil in Cairo, and a brilliant linguist, Asa developed a special admiration for the wit of Ali Salem, another stalwart of these gatherings. For most of his time abroad, Asa was disciplined, gregarious, and a model of strength. A series of setbacks in his private life, however, led to his gradual withdrawal from the world in the two years or so before his death. He was buried without public notice by a small group of his own stalwarts in the lovely but little-visited American Cemetery on Abu Sayfayn Street in Old Cairo on April 9, 2001.

Though one of his friends, Tony Burgess, has created a website in his memory ([www.tonyburgess.com/asa/asa\\_home.html](http://www.tonyburgess.com/asa/asa_home.html)), and he was recently eulogized in the *Yale Alumni Magazine*, there is still no marker on his sandy grave. For months there was nothing on the mound but a dwindling shroud of mummified flowers. But now, a sapling kharwa' tree has sprouted spontaneously at its head. Perhaps this sheltering spirit will shade the soul who rests beneath—forever a part of Egypt Land.

*Raymond Stock*

*Guest Editor*

*Cairo*

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Note: The views expressed in this issue do not necessarily reflect those of the guest editor, editors, or staff of *The Massachusetts Review*.

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### LETTER TO BROOKE COMER

*from Mohamed Laleh*

*September, 2001*

I woke up late from some party and I turned on my TV at around 2 P.M. local time to a breaking news story from the BBC, where they were showing how the first plane crashed into the WTC, and as the reporter was talking another plane was passing by from behind, then the famous explosion scene, the reporter didn't notice and I was waiting for the plane to pass by from the other side thinking that the explosion was from the first tower, from the other side of it.

I was waiting for maybe half a second, a half second that was a turning point in my life and I think in the lives of millions and millions of people all around the world. When the first plane crashed everybody was talking about an accident, everybody just wanted it to be an accident, but during this half second the accident kind of turned into something else, something no one wanted to believe in the beginning. As for me, my intuition hasn't lied to me, I felt so harmed, so broken. I felt something ugly coming out in huge proportions. It was just half a second that it took for this world to collapse, just half a second for this new ugly millenium to start.

I went to work that evening, and the world was not the same. People did not share my ideas, some were shocked and others with anti-American attitudes were even happy!!!! That was just killing me. I might be anti-American myself, but what happened has NOTHING to do with America, absolutely NOTHING. It is human consciousness shifting drastically into an absolutely new phase, the world becoming much uglier than we ever imagined. It's hate, it is just an enormous amount of hate that I experienced when I saw all this happening in front of my eyes. People hate each other to the extent that they are willing to sacrifice thousands and even millions of people just to prove something. God!!!! Can you believe it?! I still can't.

I woke up the next morning praying to God that it was just a dream, a nightmare. just another movie, or just another book I read. But reality was so ugly that it broke every hope. It is just going to be a horrible, crazy, ugly and hating world afterwards. All we can do right now is look for other people who share some values and live closely, look for friends and stick to them for the rest of one's life, try to raise children on values that might turn into reality within the next three or four generations, since it's going to take some time to overcome September the 11th.

I am sorry for you, sorry for myself, sorry for the U.S. and sorry for humanity!

## IN MEMORIAM: PETER WARG

Peter Warg is believed to have moved to Cairo in 1973. No one is quite sure where he came from, or how his life was spent before moving to the Middle East. Presumably he had a background in journalism, because he worked as a correspondent for the film trade magazine *Variety*, and he freelanced for the London-based syndicate Media International. While he never expressed a passion for Egyptian or American cinema, he did enjoy the eccentricities of Egypt's film industry, notably people whose unconventional behavior broke the rules.

Whether or not Egypt's colorful film stars, or Egypt itself influenced his fiction writing may never be known; Peter's two unpublished novel-length manuscripts were taken by the American Embassy and are currently being held in Washington in a room devoted to the possessions of dead expatriots with no living relatives. Peter did have a brother, but no one was able to contact him. No one knew his name.

Cairo was a far cry from rural Roseburg, Oregon, where Peter grew up. He lived a reclusive life, choosing the company of a few select friends, and he often walked alone through Cairo's crowded streets and noisy, smoke-filled coffee houses. Perhaps the din and chaos were somehow essential to him, grounding him in a reality of his own choosing. Aware that he suffered from liver disease, arguably from excessive consumption of Zebib, Peter refused to seek medical help and died alone in his hotel room on March 18th, 1999.

For a long time after his death, Peter's grave in the American Cemetery in Old Cairo was shadowed by a makeshift cross bearing his name misspelled, "Reter Warg." The cross is now gone, replaced by a shiny metal plaque which reads:

PETER ALLEN WARG

1938-1999

Broadcaster, Writer, Variety Correspondent,  
and Friend of Cairo  
*and the Light Shall Guide*

After this is the Arabic inscription,  
*Wa-huwa dalil al-nur*  
(And He is the guide to the light)