



29th Levantine Heritage Foundation dinner gathering in London, with guest speaker Raphael Cormack 'Cairo's multicultural interwar theatre scene' and Robert Irwin 'Western travellers in the Mamluk lands'.

Cairo's Multicultural Nightlife between the Wars



Photo courtesy Nina Subin

In the 1920s and 1930s Cairo was the most cosmopolitan place in the world. If you went for a night out in the Downtown Ezbekiyya District you could watch people from across the world – Egyptians, Syrians, African-Americans, Armenians, Russians, Sudanese, Brits and more: Muslim, Christian and Jewish. Alexandria's diverse past has been studied in depth but on Cairo's stages, in its bars and nightclubs, we can find a cosmopolitanism which is open to many more people. The nature of mass entertainment, although less refined and conventional than the high literary scene, meant that Cairo's melting pot was in its theatres and cabarets.

Raphael Cormack is working on a book call *Martyrs of Passion* (due 2020), which traces the history of this scene through its most prominent women. In this talk, he offers several vignettes from this colourful period, including two African-American jazz artists who found themselves in Cairo in the 1920s, a Yiddish theatre troupe, and the orphaned girl from the Egyptian countryside who went on to become the first woman to run her own theatrical company.



Members of the Cairo Yiddish Dramatic Circle, 1916

Strangers in a Strange Land: Western Travellers in the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt and Syria

The Arabic sources for the history of the Mamluk Sultanate (c.1250-1517) of Egypt and Syria are numerous and voluminous. Indeed the Arab chroniclers and biographers of the age seem to have suffered from logorrhoea. But they kept quiet about certain things, including the presence of Europeans in the Sultanate. For example the Italians, Bertrando Mignanelli and Emanuel Piloti were prominent merchants in Syria and Egypt respectively and both were friends and advisers of the Sultan Barquq and yet they are never mentioned in the Arabic sources. Similarly Jerusalem swarmed with Christian pilgrims during the spring-summer pilgrimage season and this gave the town's economy a vital boost, and yet they are never mentioned in the medieval Arab chronicle of the town. Again, the presence of Christian mercenaries in the ranks of the Muslim slave soldiers was hushed up. It was all rather

embarrassing, like mentioning the female members of one's family in one's writings. Just as frustrating for the modern historian is the failure of the medieval Arab chroniclers to describe the material details of everyday life. Why should they have? They were not writing for modern historians. For details of everyday life in Mamluk times we must turn to the testimony of Western pilgrims, merchants, adventurers and spies who found the lands they were travelling in all very strange - and strange and interesting it all is.



Venetian painting depicting the reception of the Venetian ambassador in Damascus (dated 1511).



Robert Irwin is a writer of both fiction and non-fiction. His works of non-fiction include *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (1994), *Islamic Art* (1997), *Night and Horses and the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature* (1999), *The Alhambra* (2004) and *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and Their Enemies* (2006). Also *Camel, Mamluks and Crusaders*, *Visions of the Jinn: Illustrators of the Arabian Nights* and the editing of and introducing *The New Cambridge History of Islam* volume 4, *Islamic Cultures and Societies to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, all in 2010 and *Memoirs of a Dervish* in 2011. In 2014 he edited and introduced *Tales of the Marvellous and News of the Strange* (a medieval Arab story collection). He was formerly a lecturer in the Department of Mediaeval History in the University of St Andrews. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, of the London Institute of 'Pataphysics, of the Royal Asiatic Society and of the Society of Antiquaries. He is a consulting editor at the *Times Literary Supplement* and is a Senior Research Associate of the Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures Department of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University. He received a D.Litt Honoris Causa from SOAS in 2016. His seventh novel, *Wonders Will Never Cease* was also published that year. *Ibn Khaldun: An Intellectual Biography* was published in 2018.

15 January 2019, 6 pm start, talks start 6.30 pm, ending 8pm
at the Royal Anthropological Institute, 50 Fitzroy Street

Talks are free for LHF members but booking essential: <https://29th-lhf-gathering.eventbrite.co.uk/>

Optional informal dinner after the lectures at a nearby restaurant where guests pay, but for numbers please still register.

Please support these events by becoming a sponsor. We provide these talks for free as part of our mission to preserve and promote the research and public understanding of Levantine heritage. Sponsoring the talks helps cover the LHF's costs in arranging these talks in central London. For sponsorship packages, please contact chairman@levantineheritage.com. All sponsors will be recognised at events and on our website.