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Délivrance, P. Chopin,
1901, *France et Syrie,
souvenirs de Ghazir et
de Beyrouth*, Tours

Recent studies on the presence of Europeans in the tropics have pointed out that colonialism was a far less stable and secure bourgeois project than previous studies on either imperial policy, economic structures or local/subaltern resistance had acknowledged ². Far from denying the unequal power relationship and often violent encounter between Europeans and natives, Ann Laura Stoler, Nicholas Thomas and other historical anthropologists have argued that the physical proximity and, indeed, intimacy in which Europeans interacted with native populations caused acute anxiety among the colonial establishments.

Generally, colonial anxiety reflected not just the fear of the foreign and unfamiliar but at a fundamental level the recognition of the fragility of the European presence itself ³. As European populations in the southern and eastern Mediterranean grew in size, the mere presence of poor, migrant wage labourers, subaltern soldiers, minor clerks, mixed blood children, raucous sailors from Greece, southern Italy or Malta, threatened the expatriate elites' edifice of entitlement and superiority which had been fabricated on the aura of European civilization. This 'first crisis of Orientalism' as Edmund Burke III called it the context of the Maghreb in the 1890s ⁴, brought to the fore colonial categories of rule and institutional forms of social discrimination and racial distinction as mechanisms of containing intimacy in the non-Western contact zones⁵. In the colonial and yet-to-be-colonized worlds it was resident missionaries who offered their expertise in judging the natives.

Beirut felt the European colonial presence long before the Lebanon was formally mandated to France in 1920. French colonial presence manifested itself in various ways and went through a number of stages. The main



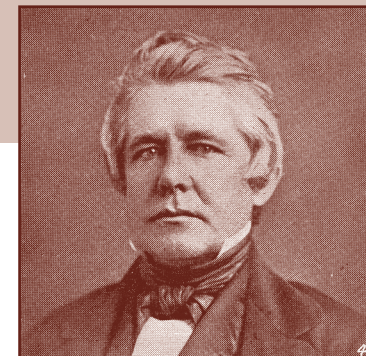
Rev. Samuel Jessup, 1862, H. H. Jessup, 1910, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*, London & Edinburgh.

conduit of French intervention in Beirut and Mount Lebanon had been the Jesuit mission which returned to the Levant in 1831 after a sixty years' absence⁶. Their imprint was cultural in general and religious in particular as the Jesuits worked hard to tie the Maronite church to France and the Vatican. Their educational work, which addressed particularly the Maronite community, had long constituted a most reliable avenue of French colonial designs and culminated in 1881 when the Vatican granted the papal seal to the Université St. Joseph⁷.

If the religious impulse of French expansion into *Bilad al-Sham* never ceased and Jesuit investment continued to be strong in the Lebanese silk industry, the spiritual dimension of the conquest of the Holy Land gave way to military and financial gambits. The French occupation of the Levant after the civil war of 1860 was thwarted only by an Ottoman-British show of force. Towards the end of the century, the dominant role of the Jesuits - and their bitter rivalry with Protestant missions - was superseded by the concerns of Beirut's French colony about economic competition with Britain over investments in the larger region of *Bilad al-Sham* as a whole⁸. French-designed port constructions, railways, tramways, road networks and gas-lighting projects multiplied the economic stakes and scales to such an extent that they somewhat dwarfed the traditional catholic commitment to the 'Maronite Mountain'.

The Jesuits of Lebanon struggled for recognition not just in Paris but also against their Protestant rivals in the region. In 1857, one Jesuit missionary related Protestant popularity to "their science, their polite manners and above all their charitable use of medicine are popular with the Christians"⁹. French missionaries learnt quickly from this insight and established orphanages and hospitals in and around Beirut. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, medical science and public health provided important avenues of French colonial intervention in the Levant. The particular features of this new kind of intervention were of an entirely different nature from the missionary philanthropy and emergency relief put in place at mid-century.

The founding of the French Medical Faculty at the Université St. Joseph in 1883, marks the entry of French officials into the realm of governance. They began to take part in public health surveys and special commissions dispatched to the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. A new crop of professional doctors arrived at the Jesuit mission in Beirut which reconciled their belief in the superiority of the Christian truth with their faith in



Rev. William M. Thomson; H. H. Jessup, 1910, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*, London & Edinburgh

science. This essay introduces one such scientific missionary and his 'magnus opus', Professor Benoît Boyer and *Les conditions hygiéniques actuelles de Beyrouth*, published in Lyon in 1897. He died in Beirut in 1897 - apparently of typhus fever.

Professor Benoît Boyer: A Scientific Missionary and the French Imperial Circuit

Boyer's survey of Beirut deserves special attention because it marked a new turn in French colonialism in the Levant. With Boyer, French cultural and economic concerns were incorporated- or developed into a biological and scientific intervention in the city as a whole - one in which sexuality and race emerged as causative agents of some inherent inability to cope with Western modernity. And the doctor had the science to prove it.

Dr Benoît Boyer came to Beirut with strong recommendations from the Hospice Civil de Lyon where he graduated in 1881. This city was long linked to the Lebanese silk trade and the Jesuit mission in the Ottoman period, and "would play a major role in convincing the French parliament to take on Syria and Lebanon as mandates after World War I"¹⁰. Significantly, neither he nor his successors at the French Medical Faculty were practitioners of tropical medicine - a prerequisite for French doctors wanting to serve in more distant colonies. He was hired as Professor of Therapeutics and Hygiene and served there from 1889 to 1897. A number of his local medical students, who helped him conduct research on climate and morbidity statistics, later went on to become medical authorities in their own right¹¹. Boyer served on the 1895 commission to establish the cause of that year's deadly typhoid outbreak; a year later, at the request of the Ottoman governor, he penned *Les Conditions hygiéniques*.

This brief outline of Boyer's career gives us a sense of the position Beirut occupied in France's imperial circuit within which Beirut was somehow of the West but not in it - it was not quite tropical, yet way south-east of Europe. It reflects the perceptions that many Europeans had of this late Ottoman city as a surprisingly familiar yet - in unexpected ways - different place. It was precisely this ambivalence, I suggest, that led to the kinds of charges and claims the author of *Les conditions hygiéniques actuelles de Beyrouth* made about "Syrian/Oriental" sexuality, psychology, and morbidity.

Before I delve into the text itself, it is important to note that the Ottoman



Rev. and Mrs. George C. Hurter, 1862; H. H. Jessup, 1910, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*, London & Edinburgh.

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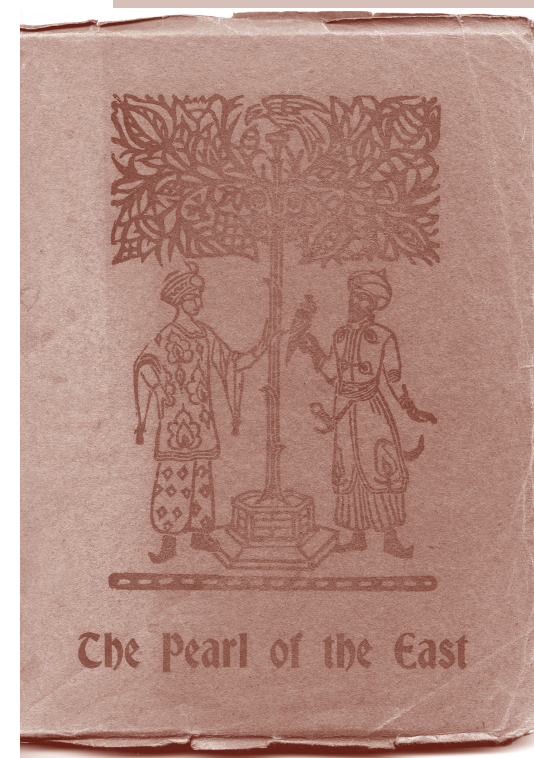
governor commissioned the report and had given Boyer the necessary *passepourtout* to enter all private homes and public installations necessary. In other words, *Les conditions hygiéniques* must also be understood in the context of ongoing Ottoman urban reforms. The Ottoman government had long institutionalised the empire's health system. In the 1830 and 40s it set up and enforced quarantines from Mosul to Mecca, effectively turning the Ottoman Empire into Europe's eastern bulwark against those epidemics that emerged further east¹². With the support of European consultants the Ottomans defeated the plague and by 1881 the municipality banished cholera from Beirut¹³.

Colonial Biopower

Les conditions hygiéniques is a 174-page survey of the health risks and pathologies in and of Beirut. It contains a few images. However, unlike many other European representations of *Bilad al-Sham* and the Middle East more generally, Boyer's book contains no portraits of half naked women, 'degenerated natives' or 'exotic nobles'. Instead, we find illustrations of 'state-of-the-art' waste disposal machines, a sewage system, 'healthy' house typologies, and a map of Beirut. Boyer is neither driven by libidinal desires nor sexual conquests à la Flaubert, Gauthier and de Nerval a generation earlier. Containment was his overarching mission: sealed containers for human excrement, temperance of human pleasures and segregating prostitutes in a tightly policed red-light district. A deep fear of excess, immoderation and transgression creeps in on every page of Boyer's health report.

The author insisted that Beirut's new quarters required cosmetic operation if they were to live up to Beirut's potential to become a truly great city. Generally, the municipality had done a good job, Boyer commended, but failed to take the necessary drastic actions in the "depraved old town". Only a total "disembowelin" {*éventration*} would set Beirut free from the urban chains and emulate "the great European cities." Just seven years after the publication of the *Mémoires* of the infamous Prefect of Paris, this very Haussmannian term was applied to Beirut. That a public hygienist, not an architect or militiaman, should first advocate gutting downtown Beirut suggests that there has existed since the nineteenth century a close ideological and institutional link in Beirut between public health and urban planning.

The study of the role of public hygienists in urban development might appear unattractive, quaint and trivial. But let us recall Dominique



Book Cover, J. Edith Hutcheon, ca.1930, *The Pearl of the East*, British Syrian Mission.

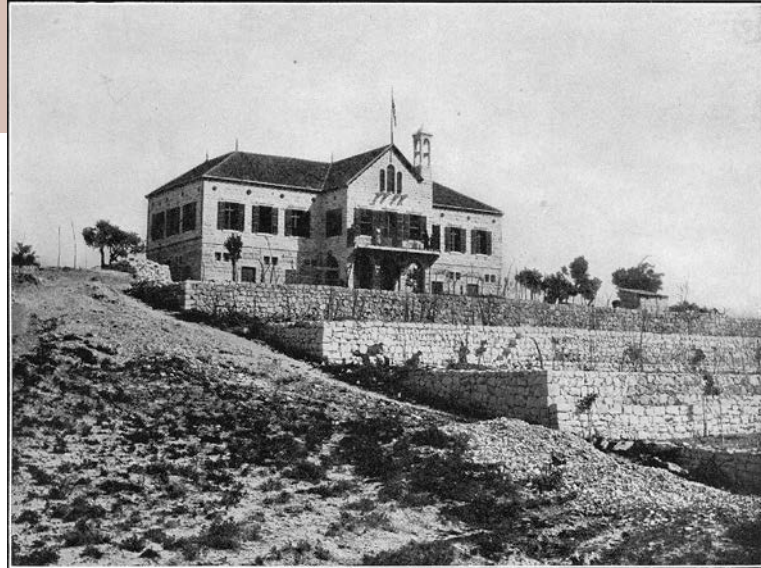
Laporte's polemic account against the historic figure of the public hygienist as the "prince consort of bourgeois civilization":

The hygienist is a hero. He overcomes the most visceral repugnance, rolls up his shirt sleeves, and takes on the cloaca. He faces the foul unnamable and speaks of that thing of which no one else will speak. ... he alone makes it speak. ... What drove them to speak so earnestly of a "revolution of cesspool drainage", to press for evacuation systems, particular modes of transport, formulas for purification? They expected nothing short of the eradication of all ills and, in the most sublime cases, the assurance of everlasting universal harmony. Essays and reports were drafted with prophetic

faith. Not one of these revolutionary heroes doubted for an instant that his invention of a separator, a ventilation system, a new form of toilet bowl, or a mobile urinal would transform the future of humanity¹⁵.

The biting sarcasm aside, Laporte raises a fundamental point about Boyer's new kind of quasi-missionary scientific zeal and an unprecedented comprehensive urban approach to colonial intervention. Boyer's tract contains the first systematic bio-political representation of Beirut¹⁶. With a penchant for apocalyptic drama, Boyer argued for a political technology that would catapult every aspect of human life - from dietary to sleeping habits; from urban to family planning - onto the domain of state knowledge/power, to be monitored, acted upon and transformed for the health benefit of the urban social body. Legions of "doctors, engineers, inspectors, architects [and] administrators" needed to be mobilized in order to survey statistically a sexually active population¹⁷. And since Boyer worked closely with the Ottoman authorities, the state became the protector of social purifications to prevent nineteenth-century spectres of biological and/or cultural degeneration.

Boyer's narrative embodied the *fin-de-siècle* tensions between scientific knowledge, secular authority and imperial power on the one hand and physical vulnerability, colonial anxiety and bourgeois insecurity on the other¹⁸. Whereas early nineteenth-century missionaries perceived illness in Syria as the physical incarnation of a metaphysical flaw, as a surface reflection of a deeper spiritual malaise, by the late Ottoman period, illness had been relocated to a biomedical framework. Illness was still a morality tale in which physical disease followed from an inherent flaw, but the explanation of that flaw had migrated from the metaphysical to the scientific. Like his counterparts at the Syrian Protestant College¹⁹, Boyer offered



Dar es Salaam Sidon orphanage (called Beulah House), H. H. Jessup, 1910, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria, London & Edinburgh*.

frequency of illnesses and diseases Boyer and his colleagues registered. Boyer incorporated European class- and gender-based notions into his racialized portrayal of “Orientals”. This emerges most clearly in his depiction of tuberculosis, the centerpiece of his description of morbidity in Beirut²⁰. Its exceptional virulence in Syria seemed odd to Boyer and his colleagues. Back in 1847 the long-serving French director of the quarantine, Dr. Sucuet, declared that tuberculosis was “virtually unknown” in the country. Moreover, Boyer mused that the rampant malaria in Syria should have held the number of tuberculosis cases to a minimum. He recorded almost 3,000 cases of malaria for 1896. Boyer had to look elsewhere for an answer.

Colonial Anxiety and Orientalism's Psychopower

Boyer found his answer in the “current social conditions”²¹. Primary among these social conditions was the “psychology of the Syrian”. By appealing to psychology, he reconciled the mid-nineteenth discourses of emotionality and passion with the notion of contagion, which had taken center stage by the end of the century. Boyer asks his readers to: Consider the alcoholic and venereal excess, long night-outs, the emotions of gambling, the manoeuvres of masturbation - repeated up to 15 times per day - and one will not be surprised that the psychological misery of these overworked youths, debilitated by constant heat and chronically fainting of hunger, one fine day manifests itself in a fast-spreading tuberculosis affliction²².

Personal excess was mirrored in material concerns:

In his quality as an Oriental, the Syrian loves luxury, splendor and ceremonial. External appearance and ostentation of wealth is the object of particular attention. Above all, the Syrian lives for the gallery; nothing is too dear to him to attract the admiration of his neighbor²³.

explanations that were rooted in secular knowledge that nevertheless invoked ineffable causation. In Boyer's case this cause was rooted in psychology. Chapter five of Boyer's tract, “On Morbidity in Beirut”, provides a ten-page classification of the



Mrs. Samuel Jessup, H. H. Jessup, 1910, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria, London & Edinburgh*.

Young family members of the social elites were diagnosed as particularly prone to conspicuous consumption and Europeanization. Of their salary of 50 francs, they spent up to 15 francs on luxury cigarettes, “and every Sunday they parade in their carriages or on their horses in a suit to match their aristocratic aspirations. In order to maintain their station, they blackmail and suck their parents dry while economizing on a healthy diet”²⁴. The Beirut youth lived above its station, both in terms of expenditures and social character. Boyer's consumptives had partaken of too many of Beirut's urban pleasures, or in other words, they were simply *too* westernized for their own good. Boyer's Beirut “Oriental” existed in the liminal and unviable space between a non-European pre-modernity and the city's all-too-real contemporary social transformations and urban modernization efforts that he himself eye-witnessed.

Boyer viewed tuberculosis, like hysteria and neurasthenia, as physical symptoms of social diseases with distinctly feminine underpinnings. This explained why “Orientals” were victims of the disease - and also why women were at even greater risk for disorders afflicting the nervous system. Their conditions owed much to the effects of “new more or less relaxed morals, material preoccupations and depravation to which women are subjected in order to satisfy the caprice of their outfit”²⁵. These new conditions, he continued, “lead us to anticipate an increase of these manifestations of hysteria”²⁶. Boyer resented neither the repression of the female body behind a veil or into a corset, nor the incarceration of women in the confines of a harem as a root cause for hysteria, but rather the opposite: astonishingly, too much liberty and leisure caused Beirut women's susceptibility for disease.

In Boyer's scientific narrative the “Syrian/Oriental” body is treated as a metonymy for Beirut's body politic writ large, and ‘irregularities’ of sexual behaviour and individual habits reflected larger deficiencies of the social organism. Here, the public hygienist's mania for cleanliness is merely a manifestation of a deeper anxiety about the close contact between the local population and the European communities who were no longer composed of the ‘pioneers’ - consuls, missionaries and well-to-do merchants. According to consular statistics on Beirut, the population of the French ‘colony’ alone rose from 600 to 1,400 between 1891 and 1897²⁷.

Unlike colonial cities in North Africa, foreigners in Beirut did not reside in a designated parallel city set apart from the local population. Diplomats,

pastors, doctors and businessmen rented floors or entire buildings from landowners all around (but rarely inside) the old city. Although these residences tended to be near educational facilities in respectable neighborhoods like Zokak el-Blat or Ashrafiyya, often foreigners lived on the geographical fringes in Ras Beirut and on the margins of respectable locations. Behind the coastal entertainment and hotel district of Zaytuneh, for example, which towards the end of the century gained a bad reputation for illicit revelry, lay the highest concentration of foreign consulates in the city²⁸.

On the eastern side of the city centre, off the main square behind the Ottoman Imperial Bank building lay Beirut's most notorious quarter. In direct proximity of the prestigious Ecole des Frères, a host of officially licensed brothels, *maisons de tolérance*, sprang up in the second half of the nineteenth century. Boyer's treatise was not absolutely opposed to prostitution as some evil deed as long as it was contained in a particular segregated district and through regular health checks. But many prostitutes lived among 'respectable' people and only came to work in the evening. The problem was uncanny intimacy of everyday life that neither Ottoman nor European authorities had access to or control over²⁹. Moreover, as half the known prostitutes were European they represented a constant menace to the self-view of respectable expatriates like Boyer³⁰.

The creation of the province of Beirut in 1888 generated a veritable investment rush into Beirut: the port was enlarged, a huge department store was raised on the harbor front, a railway line to Damascus was built and tracks for five tramway lines was laid³¹. As a tangible consequence male European labour arrived in Beirut, especially French contractors in one of the growing numbers of construction and insurance companies. Apart from the hundreds of British, Belgian, French and German engineers and accountants, scores of "nomadic workers" from southern Italy "come here from Smyrna and from other places in Turkey, hoping to find work in the railroad construction and they find themselves instead ... disillusioned, or opt for the streets, unemployed and deprived of every means."³²

Boyer's chapter five, which closes with a section on "Mortality and Morbidity of the French", expressed the growing sense of vulnerability in the foreign establishment in Beirut the rise of non-elite foreigners mingling with local lower classes and partaking in sex and alcohol bouts. Foreign semi-skilled and menial labour was more exposed to the extreme climate's health risks. Although "Beirut poses no difficulty to adapt" and "the

acclimatization of the [French?] race is perfect," contagious diseases like typhoid fever and malaria multiplied among construction workers - "even foremen and engineers charged with surveying and directing the works." It was clearly worrying to public hygienists and the general project of imperial expansion into the Levant that in the "French colony" - as among the "natives" - tuberculosis was the most frequent cause of death. Boyer therefore admonishes his readers that if the French "want to last in Syria, they need to lead a life void of excess and overwork."³³

Conclusion

Boyer's narrative may have been no more than a reflection of commonly held perceptions of degeneration, social evils and bodily abuses in France. Or Beirut may have functioned as a laboratory to test medical assumptions in France. I believe the significance of *Les conditions hygiéniques* is greater than that. Boyer's survey was probably the earliest and most comprehensive example of bio-politics in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. The very emergence of a joint Franco-Ottoman bio-politics attests to a daunting realization that the empire was "an arena of momentous change and dynamism"³⁴. Boyer's putting health-into-discourse suggests that in *fin de siècle* Beirut, Orientalist knowledge acquired another of its many skins. Evidence everywhere showed that 'the East' was unchanging no more. Rather change needed to be managed and incrementalised, lest unknown or unwanted social and psychological consequences might occur.

Beirut's middle-class intellectuals and Ottoman bureaucrats shared some of Boyer's fears and anxieties about the city³⁵. The similarity belies a fundamental difference. Boyer's discourse would form part of a larger claim to political control and comprehensive urban reconfiguration at the earliest convenient time. For Beirut's intellectuals cultural critique was an aspect of consolidation of their own vision of Beirut, whereas for the French political establishment criticism would be the basis for undermining that autonomy. Recent research on the history of European empires abroad has brought out the intimate connections between sexuality, health and colonialism and the racial categorizations that underlie this relationship. Social containment and scientific racism as much as military conquest, 'the invasion from within' and economic exploitation have been at the centre of colonial experiences around the world³⁶. Beirut has been no exception.

NOTES

1 This article is a part of a larger study on “Sexuality, Health and Colonialism in Beirut” published in Samir Khalaf (ed.), *Sexuality in the Middle East* (London: Saqi Books, forthcoming).

2 Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power; Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (New York: Columbia, 2002). Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture; Anthropology, Travel, and Government* (Princeton: PUP, 1994).

3 Keith Axel (ed.), *From the Margins; Historical Anthropology and Its Futures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 17-21.

4 Edmund Burke, “The First Crisis of Orientalism, 1890-1914,” in *Connaissances du Maghreb: sciences sociales et colonisation*, edited by J.-C. Vatin (Paris: CNRS, 1984) 211-226. Significantly, Burke dates the origins of modern Orientalism to the *fin de siècle*.

5 Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, p. 152.

6 Heyberger, Bernard, *Les Chrétiens du Proche-Orient au temps de la Réforme catholique (XVIe-XVIIIe siècles)* (Rome, 1994).

7 John Spagnolo, “The Definition of a Style of Imperialism: the Internal Politics of the French Educational Investment in Ottoman Beirut,” *French Historical Studies* 8 (1973), pp. 563-584.

8 William Shorrock, *French Imperialism in the Middle East: The Failure of Policy in Syria and Lebanon, 1900-1914* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975).

9 Edouard Billotet, quoted in Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism; Community, History and Violence in Nineteenth Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California Press, 2000), p. 89.

10 Elizabeth Thompson, “Neither Conspiracy nor Hypocrisy: The Jesuits and the French Mandate in Syria and Lebanon,” working paper at the Belagio Conference on *Altruism and Imperialism; The Western Religious and Cultural Missionary Enterprise in the Middle East* (August, 2000), 2. Dominique Chevallier, “Lyon et la Syrie en 1919; Les Bases d'une intervention,” in his *Villes et Travail en Syrie du XIX au XX Siècle* (Beirut: Maisonneuve & Larose, 1982), pp. 41-72.

11 See Université St. Joseph, *Bulletin de l'association des anciens élèves de la faculté*, (Beirut, 1908).

12 Daniel Panzac, *Quarantaines et lazarets, L'Europe et la peste d'Orient* (Aix-en-Provence: Edisud, 1986).

13 Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), chapter four.

14 Georges-Eugène Haussmann, *Mémoires du Baron Haussmann*, vol. 3 (Paris: Havard, 1890), p. 54. Haussmann himself used the term *éventrement* when he referred to piercing wide boulevards through the densely-populated and subaltern quarters of medieval Paris.

15 Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit*, translated by N. Benabid and R. el-Khoury, with an introduction by R. el-Khoury (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 118, 123.

16 This paragraph draws on Michel Foucault [1976], *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1978), and Ann Laura Stoler's colonial reading of Foucault, in *Race and the Education of Desire; Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995).

17 Boyer, *Conditions*, III.

18 Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*; see also Eugen Weber, France, *Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1986).

19 Ussama Makdisi, “Reclaiming the Land of the Bible:

Missionaries, Secularism, and Evangelical Modernity,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 120 (1997) pp. 680-713.

20 The fact that at the end of this section, Boyer informs the reader that this section was made publicly available in Arabic in the local Francophile newspaper *al-Bashir* is significant for the question of the study's audience and local impact.

21 Boyer, *Conditions hygiéniques*, 119.

22 Ibid. pp. 120, 127.

23 Ibid. pp. 119.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid. pp. 130.

26 Ibid. p. 131. Italics added.

27 Adel Ismail and Maurice Chehab, *Documents diplomatiques et consulaires relatifs à l'histoire du Liban*, vol. 16 (Beirut: Editions des Oeuvres Politiques et Historiques, 1976) 430; and M.A.E., Paris, *Correspondance Consulaire Commerciale, Turquie - Beyrouth*, vol. 12, Beirut, August 13, 1897.

28 Jens Hanssen, “Public Morality and Marginality in *fin de siècle Beirut*,” in *Outside In: Shifting Boundaries of Marginality in the Modern Middle East*, edited by E. Rogan (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002).

29 Boyer, *Conditions hygiéniques*, p. 134-5

30 With the return of the French army in 1920 “the number of prostitutes (*al-mumsat*) rose to around 850 Arab women from Syria, Palestine and Lebanon and no less than 400 foreign girls - Greek, Turkish and French.” Antoine Barud, *Shari' al-Mutanabbi, hikayyat al-bagha' fi Lubnan* (Beirut: Haqa'iq wa Arqam, 1971) p. 5.

31 Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut*, chapter three.

32 Italian consul, Beirut 1896, quoted Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *Levantine Trajectories: The Formation and Dissemination of Radical Ideas in and Between*

Beirut, Cairo and Alexandria, 1860-1914 (Harvard University: Ph.D. 2004), p. 331.

33 Boyer, *Conditions hygiéniques*, pp. 144-5.

34 Susan Bayly, “Racial Readings of Empire: Britain, France and Colonial Modernity in the Mediterranean and Asia,” in *Modernity and Culture; From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean*, edited by C.A. Bayly and Fawaz (New York: Columbia, 2002) p. 286.

35 Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut*, chapter eight.

36 Stoler, *Carnal Desire*.



Missionary School, Quaker Missionary, 1903-5. Private Collection Nadim Shehadi.