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The Suez Canal: Its history and
— Importance for the Empire. —

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On the shoulders of its pioneers, the world is borne and carried onward. They are the men, adventurers all, who sought the untrodden ways, who dared the heights and depths of the unknown. Some were impelled by a divine curiosity, some by the urge to do what had been declared impossible. Courage they all had, and those among them who were conquerors were animated not by hot-blooded impulse, but by a resolution that was cool, calculated, and unalterable.

Of this sterling quality were the engineers and influential men, who for many centuries have realized the great significance of a waterway across the isthmus between the waters of the Red Sea, and the Bay of Pelusium. Many attempts have consequently been made

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by different nations to perform this gigantic task.

The earliest known of these enterprises dates as far back as the time of Seti I. who reigned about the year 1380 B.C. This statement is founded solely on the fact that an inscription was discovered upon the walls of a temple at Karnak. Parts of this canal is still traceable in the Wadi Tumilat, and its direction was frequently followed by the engineers of the fresh-water canal, which is in use today.

Did he complete it?

This canal evidently fell into disuse, or crumbled with old age, for other canals have been built across the Isthmus by various methods and routes. Pharaoh Necho began to build a canal in 609 B.C, but, according to Herodotus, one hundred and twenty thousand men perished in the enterprise and Necho was unable to complete his task. In 520 B.C, however, Darius completed Necho's canal, thereby finishing his dream of a century before, and also rendering navigable the channel of the Heroopolite Gulf, which owing to age and continually shifting sands had become blocked.

The routes taken by vessels in the time of Necho and Darius, were far slower and more laborious than those of the present day, for there was no connection between the Red Sea, and the Bubastis-

Heropolis canal, ships having to make a circuitous route by ascending the Pelusiac branch of the Nile.

This route was appreciably cheapened and made easier by the construction by Ptolemy Philadelphus in 285 B.C. of a canal across the Isthmus between the Bubastis-Heropolis and the waters of the Red Sea.

In the time of Cleopatra, however, the dwindling of the Pelusiac branch rendered this means of communication impossible, and it was not until one hundred and twenty years later that Trajan repaired the old canal, and built another between Bubastis and Babylon.

Authorities believe very little canal building, beyond minor repairs, to have been executed in the time of the Romans, and it was not until Amr, the Arab conqueror of Egypt, built a new water-way, that this method of transportation was reopened.

Very few facts are known about the history of canals across the Isthmus, between the ^{time of} Amr and the fifteenth century A.D. when the Venetians suggested the idea to the Egyptians, but the Turks intervened. Numerous other propositions were offered, including the results of the expedition sent to Egypt by Louis XIV in 1671, and the survey ordered by Bonaparte in 1798, until in 1846 the Society, which was ultimately to lead to the construction of the present day canal was formed. For eight

years the company was in suspended animation, and might have dissolved like so many others, had not Ferdinand de Lesseps come to the front in 1854 as chief exponent of the idea.

De Lesseps obtained a concession from Said Pasha, the viceroy of Egypt, authorizing him to organize the "Compagnie Universelle du Canal Maritime de Suez", to construct a canal through the Isthmus. He, along with two other French engineers decided to run the canal from Suez to the Gulf of Pelusium, passing through the Bitter Lakes, Lake Timsa, and Menzala. The levels at each end of the canal being almost the same, locks were unnecessary, a fact which reduced the trouble and expense a great deal.

Subscriptions for the building and financing of the canal were opened to the world. The proceeds of these were not very encouraging, for the chief subscribers were France and the Ottoman Empire. England, Austria, Russia, and the United States of America, believing such a scheme impossible and not at all beneficial to their interests, held entirely aloof. When the construction was formally begun on November, 1859, the total capital of the company was 200,000,000 francs.

The building of the canal was divided into four contracts, in order to lessen the labour and to shorten the time of construction. For the most part the soil was soft and easily

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dredged, but at some points rock and sand stone were encountered, calling for the great skill of the engineers, in order to remove them. Both the shipping and the fresh water canals were constructed at the same time, so that the workmen and equipment might ascend the fresh water canal to the area in which they were working.

L By a concession passed in 1856 the work was being performed by native ^{free} labour, four-fifths of these being Egyptians. This method of forced labour was strongly disapproved of by England and by the new ruler of Egypt, so an Egyptian foreign minister was sent to Constantinople with a number of proposals about the labour and the lands of the company. After much hostility and opposition on the part of the company, a great deal of their land was taken from them, but as a result of grants given them by Napoleon III in 1864, they were allowed to retain certain portions of land along the banks of the canal, for the purpose of the construction of buildings and workshops. This abolition of forced labour was probably the salvation of the enterprise, for it meant the introduction of mechanical devices and modern engineering methods into the building of the canal.

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In 1865, great progress having been made on the canal, De Lesseps entertained one hundred delegates from different countries, and proudly conducted them through the vast

masses of machinery, which were being used in the completion of the greatest engineering marvel of his time.

De Lesseps had every reason to be proud, for he, along with two others, was the mastermind behind this seemingly impossible scheme. He and his two confederates controlled thousands of human beings and thousands of tons of the greatest mechanical devices that the minds of his age could design.

As is generally the case in an enterprise which involves a great deal of money, the estimated cost of building the canal fell far short of the mark; in fact the total expenditure was almost double that of the estimated cost. At this stage in the development of the waterway, the company was in need of finances, so they sold El Wadi, and invited a loan, which was taken up only after a lottery scheme had been attached as an attraction. By abandoning special rights and privileges, and by handing over to the Egyptian Government, hospitals, buildings, and workshops, they received in payment 39,000,000 francs. This when added to the loan and the proceeds of the sale of El Wadi, was sufficient to tide them over until the opening, when the total expenditure was found to be 432,804,892 francs, or £ 39,000,000 in English coin, though the estimated cost for a canal of larger dimensions was only 200,000,000 francs.

De Lesseps realized the task he had to perform in conquering the ever-shifting sands, which had baffled so many men before his time. But his

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great engineering mind conceived the plan by which he might overcome this enemy of all waterways. He gave the canal a great surface width and gradually sloped the banks to a depth of 24 feet. As an extra precaution the part of the sloping bank, a little above and below the water-level has been protected by a wall of rough stone pitching, to resist the action of waves.

At last in 1869 the canal was sufficiently advanced to be opened for traffic, and on November 16th an inaugural ceremony was held at Port Said. Next day, sixty-eight vessels of various nationalities began the passage through the canal, reaching Suez on the 20th. Immediately afterwards regular traffic began.

The company's troubles were by no means over with the completion of the canal, for many disputes arose as to the basis on which the tolls were being levied. The first of these was in 1873, when the interested maritime powers sent twelve delegates to a conference in Constantinople. The suggestions offered by the delegates from Great Britain eventually prevailed, and the decision arrived at was adopted by the Sultan. De Lesseps protested violently and threatened to close and abandon the canal, but the viceroy sent troops and a frigate to garrison points along the canal. De Lesseps had no other option than to give in, and the dues were fixed at 10 francs a "Suez canal" ton for vessels in cargo, and 7.5 francs a "Suez canal" ton for vessels in ballast.

In 1875 the editor of the Pall Mall magazine in London, received the information that the Khedive in Egypt wished to sell his shares and interests in the canal. He went immediately to the Earl of Beaconsfield, Benjamin Disraeli,

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and informed him of the news. Disraeli realized what the canal would mean to England, so he borrowed £4,000,000 from Rothschilds and bought the Khedive's shares, 176,602, in all, before any other country could step in and take them before him. England has never had to regret that act, for it gives her practically if not more than half the interest in the canal, and today is bringing her an annual income of £1,527,000.

As a result of a dispute in 1864, a voluntary agreement was drawn up, whereby the canal was to be enlarged, and basins made at regular intervals along the banks where ships might pass. The canal today is 198 feet wide, 33 to 42 feet deep, and with a total length of 100 miles.

The Suez Canal has been described as "the nerve centre of the British Empire," because much of Britain's trade and commercial relations with countries in the East and the South, depends upon the canal. The importance of the canal as realized by Britain, may well be seen by the attention and care she bestowed upon it in the Great War. Well trained troops of British and French soldiers, were guarding it day and night; in fact some troops are still guarding this important point of the Empire today. Many attempts were made to wrest the canal from Britain in the War, but always the British "tommies" resisted the attacks of the invaders. The canal was a great asset to the allies of Britain for supplies from their colonies in the Southern Hemisphere, because, no enemy ships being allowed into the canal, the merchant men could sail straight through without fear of being sunk, thereby reaching Eng.

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land in a much shorter space of time.

✓ Although of great use to the Empire in time of war, the canal is of even greater importance in peace. It shortens the passage to India and the East by almost half the distance, thereby increasing Britain's trade and relations with that country. Owing to the enormous tolls levied on vessels and cargo using the canal, this route is not appreciably ~~shortened~~ ^{cheapened}. The Empire in the West, and also the Mediterranean nations, have, since the opening of the canal, entered into commercial relations with the Asiatic countries, and have had to build vessels specially designed to pass through the canal.

meanings
New factors have been introduced into the perennial problems of the status of Egypt, and fresh strategic ^{needs} created which throw a heavy burden on Great Britain, who for political and strategic reasons has assumed the onus of protecting the canal.

AK The cost of exported goods and imported goods has been greatly reduced by the construction of the canal, for it decreases the expense of shipping and fuel. It has had the same effect on imported goods for the same reasons.

The colonies of New Zealand and Australia in the far South, have been linked closer to the British Isles, by the surmounting of the obstacle, that stood between them and the home country, and trade between them has been increased.

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The effect of the high tolls levied on the vessels using the canal, has practically reversed the importance attached to it. Shipping has been diverted to the Panama, and some of the tankers and coal boats from the Persian Gulf, sail to England by way of the Cape, thereby saving a considerable sum, which would have otherwise been expended on tolls. The dues have had the effect of handicapping the Asiatic trade of Great Britain, and of reducing the amount of British tonnage passing through the canal from 57 per. cent to 55 per. cent. The cost of imported goods has been increased, and a greater burden has been placed on the exported goods. One of the conditions necessary for the restoration of world trade, is the reduction of the costs of transport, and in this, the Suez canal figures in a disproportionate degree. If the cost of dues were to be halved, it would still bring the shareholders an annual income twice as much as any other gild-edged investment in the world.

This is a
quotation
from the
XIX Century
Magazine.

Thus it is to the pioneers, to the men who first thought of and undertook the task of effecting this canal - amazing, alluring, beautiful; to the courageous, the fearless, the daring; to the strong-minded and the intellectual; to those who laboured with unremitting skill and zeal, we owe the importance of this great gateway, joining the East to the West.

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