

Books



Beirut: To be or to have been

Samir Kassir's account of his city is a stunning history, a finely-nuanced portrait, and a devastating memorial to its assassinated author. By **Ellen Hardy**.

Describing the days following the massacres at Sabra and Shatila during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Beirut, Kassir refers to the city's growing resistance to its occupiers. 'As it was to do after each ordeal, Beirut tried to breathe. To breathe life – so near to death.' This knife-edge of horror and resurrection is the inescapable dynamic that pervades Kassir's monumental 550-odd page account, that takes us from 'Beirut before Beirut' and through the centuries of turbulent history of a site that seems to have been unoccupied since 600,000 BCE. We finish up with the post-war redevelopments that were the context in which the book was originally published as 'Histoire de Beyrouth' in 2003 – and is only now available in English.

Though even the most impassioned reader might find themselves flagging over the whirlwind era-hopping of the first chapters, they are still vital precursors to those on its more modern history, and provide an essential image of the city as burgeoning and declining in waves over the centuries. The modern history and war years are dealt with as Kassir

dealt with them daily as a journalist and unflinching advocate of democracy; enormously knowledgeable and scholarly, deftly sensitive, building up an intricate image of a city and history that, perhaps even more than others, defies précis. The book is also, in its way, an enormously readable love letter; though pragmatic, Kassir makes no attempt to hide his poetic adoration of his terrible, beautiful city.

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The coda to this already extraordinary feat is also the thing that defines it; Kassir's violent, politically-charged assassination by unknown hands in 2005. As well as a formidable historian and writer, a campaigner for human rights, humanism and free speech, Beirut had again killed one of its own most beloved and loving, understanding sons. A personal acquaintance of Kassir's generation recently

remarked to me that 'after Samir was killed everything went black and white... if he was still alive, he would have been able to comment on the current situation without taking sides. With his extraordinary knowledge and humanism, he may even have been able to present a third way.' More than anything else,

you cannot help but wish that Kassir was still here to explain Beirut for us all; at the same time, Kassir knew that, as a part of the city of Beirut, he breathed life – so close to death. How tragically, wastefully right he proved himself. *'Beirut' by Samir Kassir, £160,000 at all good bookshops.*

