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IN MEMORIAM: ALBERT HOURANI (1915–1993)

With the death of Albert Hourani, *IJMES* has lost far more than a member of its Editorial Board. It has lost an inspiration, an *ʿalim*, and a friend. From the time he joined the board in 1990, he served *IJMES* with the same dedication he gave to all his responsibilities. He was interested in the journal and followed its progress closely. His evaluations, typed on his notorious manual typewriter with faded ribbons, always came by return mail, for he broke all records when it came to reliability. Invariably, these carried the unmistakable Hourani stamp: unique combinations of measured tone and gentle understatement, forceful intellect, and masterly erudition. No one else combined generosity and kindness with such unflinching intellectual excellence in quite the same way or to quite the same extent. He loved to read the works of promising young scholars, and he supported their writings even if they criticized his. He was the greatest critic of his own works; yet he gave others every break he could and offered detailed and thorough comments on how to improve their work. As John Spagnolo, in a collectively written appreciation that introduces *Problems of the Modern Middle East in Historical Perspective: Essays in Honor of Albert Hourani* (1992), wrote:

Typically, he would begin with an encouraging “I read your chapter with enormous interest.” Then, after some appreciative reflection, he would, with enlightening clarity, spell out the latent significance of the work in question: “thinking about your thesis, I can now discern a general thread running through it . . .” Finally, after tactfully suggesting the need for “a few small corrections,” there followed several pages of carefully thought out and painstakingly annotated comments. No mistake was too humble to be ignored.

His trust in the intellectual development of others was perhaps tied to his own remarkable odyssey from political to intellectual to social history, in the course of a shining career that spanned fifty years. Albert—as his students fondly called him—was born in Manchester, England, on 31 March 1915, the son of Fadlo and Sumaya Hourani, Presbyterian emigrants from Marjayun in what is now South Lebanon. Fadlo ran a cotton-export business at a time when Manchester was the world’s cotton center and, following Lebanon’s independence in 1943, he was appointed its honorary consul in that city. Albert and his two brothers and three sisters grew up in a district of town with a large Middle Eastern population, in a house continually visited by relatives, friends, and business associates. As Cecil Hourani, Albert’s younger brother, recalled in his book, *An Unfinished Odyssey: Lebanon and Beyond* (1984), “On Saturdays, when my father lunched at home with his Lebanese and Syrian fellow businessmen and clients from abroad, we ate the food

of the Lebanese villages—*kibbé*, and the traditional dish of Saturday *mujaddara* . . . on Sunday there was an English roast, followed by an apple pie or a milk pudding.” While Albert never much liked certain pungent vegetables associated with Middle Eastern cuisine, he loved the warmth and hospitality that went with it. Nor, in his youth, did he share his brothers’ curiosity about the Middle East; he preferred English literature and the study of English political institutions and society.

He went to school in Manchester and London before going on to Magdalen College, Oxford, in 1933 to begin making the intellectual choices that would shape his future. He studied economics, taught then with an emphasis on economic thought from Adam Smith to Alfred Marshall (J. M. Keynes’s *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* was published in his last year of undergraduate studies). He also read politics—which then meant primarily the modern history of Britain and other European powers—and international relations in the second half of the 19th century; the “Eastern Question” was his introduction to the study of the politics of the modern Middle East. His third and favorite field was philosophy, from Descartes to Kant to the modern British empirical philosophers. He also read Hegel for a whole term. These studies left him with a lasting interest in the history of ideas.

Albert Hourani credited the Oxford tutorial system with showing him the importance of establishing a personal relationship between tutor and tutee, a practice he followed throughout his life. However, his virtue lay in using it as effectively as he did, in a way that became known as the Hourani teaching style. He was renowned for his devotion to students. He guided them, fostered their intellectual growth, built their confidence so that they could go beyond what even they knew they could accomplish, and inspired them to produce their best work. They admired the scholar in him, but it was the teacher they loved. He brought them together in their devotion to him, even when they had differences among themselves.

In 1934 he met Charles Issawi, who had just arrived at Oxford. They became lifelong friends. Charles taught Albert about his native Egypt and introduced him to the cosmopolitanism of its capital, so very different from the Lebanese village life of Albert’s parents, and Albert eased Charles into a better understanding of the English. They were both members of the Labour Club who, as Issawi wrote in “My Life and Pleasant Times with Albert Hourani” (published in *State and Society in Lebanon* [1991], a collection of conference papers dedicated to Albert), were “somewhat closer to its left than to its right.” They both read philosophy, politics, and economics (“PPE”), and they were not beyond being mischievous. Having heard the eminent philosopher R. G. Collingwood claim to be familiar with all the works of Dilthey and Simmel, Albert decided to investigate. He went into Collingwood’s rooms while he was away and discovered that Collingwood indeed had sets of both philosophers but that their pages were entirely uncut. “We all shook our heads over the deceitfulness of professors, little knowing to what depths *we* would sink in the future.”

Albert graduated in 1936 with the best “first” in “PPE” of his year, and he went to the Middle East and taught politics for two years at the American University of Beirut, where his father had studied when it was still called the Syrian Protestant College. In Lebanon, Albert came to appreciate more fully the family ties, values,

and culture of his parents' country of origin. He also acquired his first exposure to the American academic system with which he became so familiar in later visits to the United States. He continued to read philosophy and intellectual history, which he discussed with his colleague Charles Malek. He also became interested in the new Arab nationalism that was beginning to assert itself in Syria and Palestine under the Mandate. He was exposed to the ideas of his colleague Qustantin Zurayq and read George Antonius's *The Arab Awakening*, published in 1938, which made a deep impression on him. He was drawn into the problems of the Palestinians through the revolt in Palestine and by the university students' keen interest in it. Isma'īl Khalidi (whose son Rashid was later to study with him at Oxford) was among the students whose commitment to the Palestinian cause impressed Albert.

When World War II broke out in 1939, he became a researcher at the Royal Institute of International Affairs where he worked with, and was influenced by, the ideas of Arnold Toynbee and H. A. R. Gibb. He then served as an analyst at the office of the British Minister of State resident in Cairo from 1943 to 1945. In the next two years, he worked as principal researcher and writer—first in Jerusalem and then in London—of the Arab Office created by Musa 'Alami, whom he helped in preparing the documents presenting the Arab case to the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry, which visited Palestine in 1946. Albert's testimony showed both skill and moderation and was the most effective of the statements made from the Arab point of view. After that, he never again wrote on policy or current affairs, partly because the need to drive home points to politicians meant sacrificing the balance and nuance that mattered so much to him and which became his trademark. In 1946 he published *Syria and Lebanon* and in 1947 *Minorities in the Arab World*.

He devoted the rest of his life to an academic career. In 1948, Albert was offered a fellowship at Magdalen College and, three years later, he took up his post as first university lecturer in the modern history of the Near East. In 1955, he married Odile Wegg-Prosser and, after another visiting professorship at the American University of Beirut in 1956–57, he moved from Magdalen College to St. Antony's College, to become director of St. Antony's newly created Middle East Centre. In 1962, he published *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, the study of Arab political and social thought from 1798 to 1939 that became a classic.

Albert's academic life was centered in Oxford. It remained his home and the central focus of his career, although he lived abroad on several occasions and taught at a number of American universities, including Harvard where he felt most at home. The Houranis moved from Church Walk to Woodstock Road in Oxford and, after retiring, to Belitha Villas in London. Odile ran their household with flair and warmth and, for the thirty-eight years of their marriage, entertained their numerous friends, relatives, and students. Her kindness of heart and her wit made it fun to be at the Houranis. Students loved to visit them and to be part of the Houranis' household, where they also enjoyed the company of daughter Susanna and of Odile's children Julia and Angelo Hornak, whom Albert regarded as his own.

Albert's first graduate students were the Sudanese scholar and later diplomat Jamal Muhammad Ahmad and the distinguished French historian André Raymond. There followed a long line of graduate students who were drawn to Albert's vision of history that was to transform the field of Middle East studies. It combined

knowledge with intuition to analyze the intellectual, political, and social movements of the region with the empathy and sensitivity of the insider. The breadth and wealth of peoples and cultures in the region required intellectual curiosity, a willingness to explore often untapped Middle Eastern sources, acquaintance with how Middle Easterners themselves presented their histories and cultures (without glossing over their shortcomings), and the openness of mind needed to question notions of regional “decline.”

Albert’s numerous writings—including his magisterial synthesis, *The History of the Arab Peoples*, which was published in 1991 and became a bestseller—were predicated on an understanding of both European and Middle Eastern cultures, and of Arab history, politics, and culture. Albert drew attention to the centrality and subtleties of urban politics. He showed how the Ottoman government set out to rule its Arab provinces, and how it learned that, most of the time, it could only do so with some sort of alliance with, or at least the acquiescence of, local notables. They then became the power brokers and middlemen between the rulers and the populations under them.

Albert’s works also captured a Middle East in the midst of great change that was partly brought about by inequalities with the industrializing West. One effect was to shift the balance of power and wealth between the old Muslim cities and the new merchant cities directly involved with European trade. Western influence also had far-reaching effects on the political ideologies of the Middle East, channeling Arab social and political thought toward ways to better Arab societies and energize their institutions. Endorsing nationalism became one solution to the Arab quest to defend and protect Arab culture. Albert fully understood the concerns of the nationalists, and he sympathized with, and in his own way contributed to, their national aspirations. But he was first and foremost a moderate and tolerant man, who shunned excesses and intolerance of any sort, regardless of the merits of the cause that provoked them.

Despite the international recognition he attained, he remained a modest man who courteously but firmly managed most of the time to stay away from the lime-light of television and newspaper interviews. Although he delighted in being kept informed of what was going on, he unfailingly spoke kindly of colleagues and gave everyone the benefit of the doubt. He was a quietly but deeply religious man (he converted to Roman Catholicism in the 1950s), and he radiated an inner peace.

The death of Albert Hourani in Oxford on 17 January 1993 is a terrible loss to *IJMES*, to the field of Middle East studies, and especially to all of us who have had the privilege of knowing him. It deprives us of a voice of reason, compassion, and tolerance in a world that has become increasingly fond of intransigence.

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