BOOK REVIEWS


This elegant and neatly printed volume is a collection of papers contributed by both Western and Eastern scholars to the ‘study conference’ held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, between the years 1956 and 1958, on the course and character of historical writing on the peoples of Asia. The work under review is the last volume in the series, the others being Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon, ed. C. H. Phillips; Historians of South-East Asia, ed. D. G. E. Hall and Historians of China and Japan, ed. W. G. Beasley and E. G. Pulleybank. Lately it seems almost to have become a fashion to bring out collections of individual papers, on the pattern of Festschrifis, or to publish lectures by individual scholars. This method of book production while being easy and speedy suffers from certain disadvantages too, the main being a rather loose and disjointed picture of the subject treated in addition to its being a case of divided responsibility. On the other hand it provides the reader with an interesting pot-pouri of learned writing almost on the same scale as the special issues of scholarly periodicals.

The contributors to this volume on the Middle East historiography include many a leading historian, each one of them being an authority on the subject he treats, thus affording both to the specialist and the layman a welcome opportunity of analysing not only their own stand-points, vis-à-vis Muslim historiography, but also making them “aware of the underlying assumptions, predilections and prejudices of writers” and historians.

In reviewing such works as the present one it becomes rather difficult to pick and choose without running the risk of making invidious distinctions. All articles and papers serve their purpose, have their own individuality and hence their own utility.

Prof. H. A. R. Gibb’s rather short paper on “Islamic Biographical Literature” discusses the origins and structure of biographical dictionaries admitting very frankly that this discipline—historical biography—“is a wholly indigenous creation of the Islamic Community” and “developed simultaneously and in close association with historical composition”. Discussing the sources of biographical notices, Prof. Gibb observes that “Early biographical materials are obviously compiled from oral traditions and for the most part presented as such, with chains of transmission”. This has led him to remark a little further that “The problem of critical analysis is usually, therefore, one of some difficulty, and has scarcely been attempted as yet” (p. 57). It is difficult to understand what exactly the author has in mind. If by this he means what is known as historical criticism in modern times, he is right. But if he means that little or no criticism has been undertaken by the Muslims themselves of their own traditions, he is obviously not correct.

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In fact the compilation of hadith-works gave birth to this critical apparatus based on asma' al-rijāl in Islam or the biographical data of the transmitters, which in its turn was instrumental in the assiduous cultivation by the Muslims of the discipline of biographical writing covering practically all classes of people. As a nation which may justly take pride in being the inventors of biographical dictionaries the Muslims may likewise claim a pride of place for originating the science of criticism and comparison—al-fann al-jarḥ wa'l-ta'dil, which was practically unknown before their times. It was also their masterly application of this science which resulted in the production of a number of critical works on hadith-literature—the various tadhkīrat al-mawḍūʻāt. In the face of these works it becomes rather difficult to agree with Prof. Gibb that a critical analysis of the extant biographical dictionaries has "scarcely been attempted, as yet". There can, however, be no difference with him regarding his wholesome advice to the users of biographical materials in Islam that it is "unsafe to draw conclusions from the anecdotes of the biographical works, unless substantiating data can be adduced. On the other hand, if no bias can be demonstrated or suspected, the general judgments of the biographers on individual princes, governors or officials may be generally accepted" (p. 58).

Prof. Franz Rosenthal has chosen to contribute a rather controversial paper on "The Influence of the Biblical Tradition on Muslim Historiography". Before a critical analysis of this paper is attempted it would be well to know what Prof. Rosenthal exactly means by the term 'Biblical'. He says, "'Biblical' is understood here to mean 'Judaeo-Christian', with the restriction of this term to its cultural, religious sense in which it is usually employed in historical contexts". Let it be said at the very outset that mere allusions and references to Biblical prophets, patriarchs and personalities, anecdotes, events and happenings in the Qur'an do not necessarily imply that the Prophet or his audience had full knowledge of the contents of the Scriptures. Starting from wrong and baseless premises the author arrives at equally wrong conclusions. After building up the fanciful theory of Biblical influence on the course of Muslim historiography he observes, "Above all, whenever they thought along world historical lines, the vast majority of Muslim historians closely adhered to the views that Muhammad had derived from biblical tradition and made part and parcel of Muslim thinking" (p. 39). In other words this means that the entire course of Muslim historiography was indirectly influenced by Biblical tradition reducing the Islamic discipline of historiography to a mere corollary of the Biblical, i.e., Judaeo-Christian historical writing and having no separate entity of its own. It is really a very bold statement by a leading Jewish scholar. To begin with there are very strong reasons to believe and Prof. Rosenthal has not given us any evidence for the contrary that the Qur'ānic view of history is radically different from that of the Bible on certain fundamental questions. Indeed, even the Christian view of history is fundamentally diametrically opposed to Judaism. One can do little but regret this extremely prejudiced and superficial approach to Islamic historical tradition. The culminating point of this brilliant argument of Prof. Rosenthal is the astounding statement: "However, the last of the points mentioned [views derived by the Prophet from Biblical tradition and made part and parcel of Muslim thinking] brings us to the aspect of Muhammad's
view of history that was decidedly harmful to historical thinking in Islam” (p. 39). I confess my inability to understand the logic behind such loose and wild statements, which, when challenged, the learned author will find it extremely difficult to substantiate and prove. As to the Biblical stories which found their way into Islamic theological, exegetical and historical works through the agency of the Jewish converts to Islam like Ka‘b al-‘Abbār and Wahb b. Munabbih, the exegetes have very plainly characterized them as wholly unreliable and, therefore, unfit to be employed for serious purposes. These Isra‘īliyyat—as the Muslim commentators of the Qur‘ān style them—contain such blasphemous and disgraceful stories as David’s (whom the Muslims regard as a Prophet and the Jews as the pride of their rulers) seduction of a lawfully married woman and committing adultery with her; Solomon’s indulgence and connivance at some of his wives worshipping idols in his own palace. Viewed from this angle the motives of the author may be judged rather clearly especially when set off against such observations as: “Thus, unless it can be shown that a given story cannot have come to the Muslims from Jewish or Christian sources, the Judaeo-Christian tradition remains the most likely source of origin, in particular for all the older material” (p. 43). It may be mentioned in passing that those Muslim historians who open their works with the stories of the Creation and carry them down the centuries to the birth of Islam do so merely as a fashion, rather than by way of serious historiography for want of reliable source-material to draw upon and vouchsafe for the truth of the stories recorded. They scrupulously avoid making any positive statements or presenting fiction as established historical facts. This explains the frequent and unrestricted use by them of the trite but meaningful phrase ‘God knows best’ when concluding an apocryphal narrative or a story which was current among the Jews or the Christians of Arabia. Western scholarship has failed to appreciate this pietistic attitude of Muslim historians towards the handling of material based on the Judaeo-Christian tradition, on whose elaboration Prof. Rosenthal has expended so much time and energy. In fact the Judaeo-Christian tradition gave to the Muslims not history but a collection of stories; strict historiography, in this tradition begins only with the Muslims.

The conclusion that the author has drawn, one is constrained to remark, is neither true nor factual and is typical of the general, but most lamentable, trend of the entire article. Prof. Rosenthal says, “... I believe that the biblical tradition occupies a special place in the history of Muslim historiography. It provided Muslim historical writing with some of its most significant elements. It all but deprived it of the chance to experience great developments in historical thinking. The problems connected with the biblical tradition are often different from those which confront students of other aspects of Muslim historiography. Many of them spring from the darkness that surrounds the earliest period of Islam’s intellectual and literary history. Others are obscured by the large mass of widely scattered and seemingly disparate materials. None seems incapable of an eventual solution” (p. 45). It will be interesting to note that in the very next article by Prof. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Dūrī, presently Rector, University of Baghdad, a befitting answer to these doubts is supplied and quite incidentally in the concluding paragraph too. Briefly describing “The Iraqi
School of History to the Ninth Century'. Prof. Düri observes: ‘These [Iraqi] historians added their wide researches—historical, geographical and literary—to the work of *akhbāris*, and used oral and written material (after reading them to some *shaykh*), and sometimes documents and archives. They synthesized the bias of genealogists, *akhbāris*, and phrenologists, and benefited greatly from the School of Medina. They superseded the *akhbāris*, and definitely set the lines of Muslim historiography’ (p. 53).

In a very well-documented and extremely well-written essay Prof. Claude Cahen surveys the historical writings on the Seljuqids. In a comparatively short space he has compressed a large mass of material which will prove of great value to those interested in the history of the Seljuqids, who still await a master historian to describe exhaustively their rise and fall.

Other articles of note in the collection are those by Prof. Halil Inalcik and Prof. Bernard Lewis. The former writes on ‘The Rise of Ottoman Historiography’ and the latter on ‘The Use by Muslim Historians of Non-Muslim Sources’. Both the articles are epitomes of deep scholarship and vast study. In his thought-provoking essay Prof. Lewis analyses the causes that prevented or rather repelled Muslim historians from attending to the historiography of nations and communities other than their own. He has drawn the attention of Muslim historians to this great gap in their vast historical literature. How sad it is to note that even in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent people practically know nothing about the history of such great nations as the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans. Islamic history itself was introduced as a subject for study in the Universities of Pakistan only very recently. This lacuna in our University syllabi and this deficiency of our educational system must be removed as early as possible. Students in the educational institutions of the subcontinent know enough about England and America but their knowledge of other countries, including the neighbouring Afghanistan, is sadly deficient. Muslim historians, teachers and students of history should take a lesson from what Prof. Lewis has said on the need for a reorientation of historical studies in Muslim lands.

Dr. Wilfred Cantwell Smith has projected his pet views on ‘The Concept of Islam as an Historical Development’ harping on the thesis ‘that the word *Islām* has become the name not even of a religion but of a culture or a community. It apparently signifies not the relationship of obedience and submission of the individual before his Creator nor even the ideal pattern of such relationship systematically organized into a group-order to which the life of the community ought to be’. Can we ask Prof. Smith for the necessary evidence that *Islām* has come to mean for the Muslims the life-pattern of their community divorced from the ideal of submission to God? Can he even specify what would constitute the necessary evidence for this? The building-up of an organised tradition can certainly not be accepted as such an evidence. no matter how much Dr. Smith’s personal predilection may be against it. Dr. Albert A. Hourani, in his ‘Introductory Remarks’ has attempted an analysis of this ‘self-image’ of Islam as drawn by Dr. Smith. Prof. Hourani’s remarks in this context (pp. 455-6) will be read, it is hoped, with interest and the attention that they deserve.

Other contributors to this volume include such well-known authors and
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scholars as G. E. von Grunebaum, F. Gabrieli, Sāmī Dahhān, Charles Pellát, B. Spüler, Ann K. S. Lambton, Umberto Rizzitano, J. W. Fück, G. E. Shyayal and W. Montgomery Watt. The book is neatly printed and well got-up. Both the editors and the publishers are to be congratulated on their having done an excellent job. We agree with the editors that "... to find a key to the outlook of modern Muslim peoples, we [Europeans] need to know far more about what they think of their history, its emotive power for them and their attitude to it as mirroring their present 'group-consciousness' " (p. 4). We hope that this volume will fully serve the purpose in view.

KARACHI

A. S. BAZMEE ANSARI

Annemarie Schimmel, GABRIEL'S WING—A STUDY INTO THE RELIGIOUS IDEAS OF SIR MUHAMMAD IqBAL, E. J. Brill, Leiden, pp. x + 428, price 50 glds. or Rs. 65.00.

Iqbal's fame had spread far and wide, even outside the land of his birth, in his life-time. No other Muslim thinker and poet of the modern age has attracted so much attention of the West. Following the trail blazed by Nicholson, several Orientalists have rendered some of his works into the leading European languages and produced scholarly studies of his thought and poetry. Prominent among them is Prof. A. Schimmel who has translated the Paydām-i Maṣḥiq and the Jāvidnāmah into German verse, published a Turkish commentary on the latter, contributed a score of well-written articles and delivered dozens of lectures on him in Germany, Pakistan, Turkey, Iran, and Sweden.

It is, therefore, in the fitness of things that a scholar of her calibre should have addressed herself to an analysis of Iqbal's religious ideas—a task not undertaken hitherto on the present scale. A specialist, no less than a lay reader, will find Gabriel's Wing a veritable store of information. The author displays a thorough acquaintance with the entire body of literature on the philosopher-poet, in various languages, enormously grown in recent years. It was no easy task to string together pearls of Iqbal's thought scattered all over his poetical and prose works, articles, letters and speeches. It is no small merit of the book that, wherever possible, the author stays in the background and lets Iqbal speak for himself.

In comparing and contrasting Iqbal with Muslim and Christian theologians, mystics, philosophers and poets, Dr. Schimmel has pointed to unexplored avenues of research no less than traced and located some obscure literary allusions. "What is the proof? The face of the Beloved! " (Jāvidnāmah, p. 37) is traced to a verse recited by Shi'bī of Baghdad on his death-bed (p. 125). It is delightful to learn that Francis Thompson's Hound of Heaven was anticipated by Niẓāfī, a 10th century Iraqi mystic (p. 190), and that the metaphor of the frog-in-the-mud (Jāvidnāmah, p. 18) is an echo of the Upanishads (p. 334).

Discussing his Development of Metaphysics in Persia, Dr. Schimmel points out that the author was perhaps the first to draw attention to al-Suhrawardī al-Maqtūl, 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jilī, Mullā Ṣadrā and Ḥādi Sabzawārī (p. 38) and adds "the study shows a remarkable knowledge of European theology from Thomas Aquinas to Adolf von Harnack". To quote her again, in Jāvidnāmah.