BOOK REVIEWS


This famous little book by Professor Gibb is a critical and comprehensive survey of Arabic literature.

This excellent and well-written Introduction to Arabic Literature was first published in 1926, and the second edition came out in 1963. So far as the present edition is concerned, in the words of the author himself, "... remains a selection, and adheres to the aims of the original edition, to indicate the scope of Arabic literature in its entirety and to present in somewhat fuller detail its more purely literary branches." Undoubtedly this book has remained a text-book for University students everywhere.

Though above criticism, certain statements of the author cannot escape the notice of Muslim scholars. Professor Gibb, for example, opines: "Most disturbing of all, what guarantee could there be that ambitious and jealous rawis might not pass off poems of their own composition or of some obscure poet as the productions of some famous poet of the past? The philologists who collected the old poetry in the eighth century were, however, well awake to these questions, perhaps even excessively so, to judge by the accusations of forgery freely bandied about between rival collectors and schools" (pp. 20-21). As the author has clearly emphasized the genuineness of a part of pre-Islamic poetry, the style, diction and technique of expression, beyond doubt, were characteristics which carefully distinguished one qasidah from the other.

The tribal judges were obviously so much familiar with the diction and style of different poets that they never allowed interpolation or plagiarism. This is the reason why the rawis (rhapsodists) were, barring a very few of them, never accused of forgery or interpolation. At the time of reciting poems and verses, the rawis would have surely stammered, hesitated, and stopped reciting abruptly had they confused the composition of one bard with that of the other. The faculty of memory itself is sufficient to detect forgery and arbitrary changes. This the author himself seems to have supported (cf. p. 21).

Another point has, of course, remained unsolved. No attempt seems to have so far been made to find the reason why the poems and verses of the fourth and fifth-century poets have not come down to us.

It is a known fact that the whole of the Qur'ān was written down on various writing materials and was arranged and memorised by an overwhelming number of the Saḥābah, during the very lifetime of the Holy Prophet, but the author refers to the compilation of the Qur'ān, no doubt, in his own masterly fashion, in a way that casts doubts on the Holy Book. Moreover, according to him, the Qur'ān suffers from "haphazardness of the compilation" and want of arrangement "... either chronologically or in order of content", presence of "earlier and later passages, moral discourses, and legal provisions, ... in the same chapter (sūra)" (pp. 33-4).
Admitting that "To Muslims the Koran is the Very Speech of God, revealed word for word to His Prophet Muḥammad through the angel Gabriel," and that "For them there can be no question of earlier and later styles, phraseology, or doctrine;" Professor Gibb declares "but the western student, recognizing in it the handiwork of Muḥammad the man, finds much of its interest in the way it reveals the gradual development of a fascinating personality and the stages by which his early teaching expanded into a new religion.

"In the earliest portions of the Koran the reader has the feeling that Muḥammad is struggling with the means to express his ideas. He was not a practised speaker, and he had to create his own medium for the new message he felt impelled to deliver. The gift of words came with practice, but to the end the Koran expresses its theological and philosophic concepts in terms of symbolic action or description. Almost equally difficult was the problem of style. The High Arabic of the poets supplied an established linguistic medium, which had already been adapted to the practice of oratory; in rhetorical style, however, the concision sought by the poet was replaced by a looser and more expansive discourse, a habit of balancing phrase with phrase and of giving emphasis by parallelism in structure, assonance, and especially end-rhyme (saj'). Alongside this there continued to exist the traditional oracular style affected by the diviners, consisting of a series of obscure rhyming oaths (usually relating to celestial phenomena), followed by two or three brief rhymed phrases, often as obscure." (pp. 35).

No contemporary evidence has been cited in support of the criticism made in the above quotation against the Qur'ān. The Qurayshites and the Arabs never uttered a single word against the composition, style and the usage of Arabic oaths which all were well understood by them. They were rather spell-bound by the Qur'ānic verses which they very much appreciated. What appears to be loosely arranged, 'obscure rhyming oaths' and 'obscure rhymed phrases' to one of the greatest orientalists, in fact, bewitched the Arab orators who listened to the Prophet with admiration and enthusiasm. The contemporary critics of the Qur'ān could only say that Muḥammad was a poet, a kāhin and majnūn when they found that he had excelled them in expression and oratory. The author is fully aware of the opinions which the pagan Arabs expressed about the Qur'ān and is surely acquainted with the dialogue of Heraclius, the Byzantine Emperor, and Abū Sufyān, before the latter accepted Islam.

Professor Gibb has not pointed out any verse which makes the reader to have "the feeling that Muḥammad is struggling with the means to express his ideas" (p. 34). It is simply astonishing that he does not recognize any difference between the verses of the Qur'ān and the other utterances of the Prophet of Islam, a large portion of which has survived practically verbatim in the collections of Hadīth. That the Qur'ānic verses were different from the speech of Muḥammad is clear from Professor Gibb's own statement: "His Meccan opponents naturally classed him [Muḥammad] with the poets and soothsayers, who in the common belief were inspired by genii (jinn)" (p. 35).

Though the author mentions "borrowings from Judaeo-Christian sources" (p. 40), he does not refer to any particular source. To explain why there survived negligible 'literary remains,' he obviously, in the light of the Hadīth forbidding
Companions from taking down anything other than the Qur'an from the Prophet, opines in general: "The literary remains of all this activity are negligible, chiefly because at this stage the habit of oral transmission was still dominant, and perhaps even reinforced by religious discouragement of putting anything on paper except the Koran. The prejudice was most effective in sphere of religious studies, which were, of course, those most pursued" (p. 40). This surmise deliberately ignores the Prophet's encouragement to obtain knowledge even from China and the permission to record all knowledge. Instances are too well-known to be cited.

Another astonishing statement appears on page 41 to the effect that "Muhammad himself . . . inevitably adopted a hostile attitude to it [poetry]." Although Islam discouraged satire and lampoon and other useless kinds of poetry, it in fact gave an impetus to Arabic poetics which later produced poets like Ka'b b. Zuhayr, Farazdaq, 'Umar b. Rabi'ah, Jamil, Kuthayyir 'Azzah and a host of others in the Hijaz, in Mesopotamia and other places, as has been mentioned by the author himself.

Professor Gibb is full of praise for the 'Abbasids, perhaps for the fact that in their regime he could trace "the contributions of the Aramaic and Hellenized peoples to Muslim literature and thought." (p. 47). The Umayyads, on the contrary, most of them being rigid Muslims, appear to the author to be "somewhat arbitrary" (p. 56) in their legal methods.

In spite of such statements to which exception could be taken, the book gives a very critical and comprehensive survey of the Arabic language in English and stands unique in its field. Irrespective of the sarcasm imbedded cleverly in the style and the language of the book it treats in a very masterly and skillful manner of every branch of Arabic studies. Drawing of a vivid and almost reliable picture of all the activities of the Arabs in different parts of Asia, Africa and Europe, remains its own peculiar feature.

Students of Arabic literature will, it is hoped, find this revised edition of a book, long out of print, extremely useful and illuminating.

KARACHI


Dr. Ghulam Wahid Choudhury, Professor and Head of the Department of Political Science, Dacca University (East Pakistan), has already made his mark as a keen analyst of Pakistan affairs by his earlier work Constitutional Development of Pakistan and a number of scholarly articles, published in recognized journals of Political Science and International Affairs. In the present volume, Dr. Choudhury undertakes to discuss the evolution of parliamentary institutions in Pakistan. He analyses the political, economic and social forces which in 1962 ultimately led to the constitutional change-over from parliamentary to presidential system of government under the revolutionary regime of Field-Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan.

The book has been divided into eleven chapters. The first five deal with the different constitutional stages through which the parliamentary system passed