

The fortunes of Middle Eastern studies in Britain have varied according to the prevailing national or governmental mood. In 1947, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, a government-appointed body (the Scarbrough Commission) reported that in a changing world Britain had to prepare for a new relationship with the East, on the basis of more knowledge and a better understanding of the area. On the recommendation of the Commission, a number of university posts was established in "Oriental"* (including Middle Eastern) studies. There was an upsurge of interest in the area, confirmed by the founding, in 1946, of the Association of British Orientalists, which had as its stated objective: the coordination of the activities of British Orientalists in order to advance and diffuse knowledge of Eastern civilizations. The Association played (and continues to play) a useful role, although the wide area and spread of disciplines covered—all the East from earliest civilization onwards—has weakened its integrative aspect.

Government interest in supporting those studies lessened in the late fifties; there was a further upsurge in 1960. True to form, another body was appointed (the "Hayter" Committee), which reported in 1961 that Britain's role in the world was changing again, and that the time had come to study the living societies of the non-Western world in a new context. "Orientalism" should not die, but area specialists (economists, geographers, other social scientists) should be trained to create a better-informed public and to increase the total amount of knowledge of the non-Western world in Great Britain. The government accepted the report with a will and many new posts and area centres in Middle Eastern and other studies were created. Consequently, the numbers of undergraduate and post-graduate students also increased.

There developed slowly a corps of Middle Eastern specialists in Britain who more or less knew and sometimes cooperated with the more traditional Orientalists, Arabists and others. In 1973, at a meeting of all those professionally interested in the Middle East, it was decided to found the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BSMES). Its aim is "to encourage and promote the study in the United Kingdom of the Middle Eastern cultural region from the end of classical antiquity and the rise of Islam" (much was the discussion and heart-searching that went into the production of those last 16 words!). The implied intention was also to bridge any gap between the traditionalists and the modernists. The first president of the Society was the ideal person to attempt to build this bridge. Albert Hourani had long been a member of the Oriental faculty in Oxford, a colleague of Gibb, Schacht and others; and he was also Director of the Middle East Centre, an institution that received "Hayter" recognition and posts. As he said in his presidential address of 1974:

The Hayter Committee was right, it seems to me, not only in seeing that there would be a greater interest in the cultures and societies of Asia, but in understanding also that those who pursue different disciplines but are interested in the same area

* One feels somewhat exposed using this term in the post-Saidian era.

of the world do share a deep common interest. We are now an academic community, within certain obvious limits, and we have some common professional concerns. We are all occupied with certain problems produced by a combination of two factors: the growing demand for study and teaching of Middle Eastern subjects, and the financial crisis which has suddenly ended a long period of expansion in higher education. At moments of financial stringency, we need to co-operate more closely than in times of expansion, and this Society can help us to work out ways of doing so.

BSMES has had the obvious example of MESA to emulate, but with at least two major differences: the numbers of those interested, and finance. The total possible catchment is obviously much smaller in Britain than it is in North America, even though membership is open to all interested in the Middle East, not solely to academics. The Society at present has 252 members, in addition to 250 subscribers to its *Bulletin*. To date, BSMES has been financially entirely self-supporting and has received no grants from outside bodies. Membership is mixed and includes university teachers in all aspects of Middle Eastern studies, retired diplomats, journalists and broadcasters, private scholars, librarians and archivists, and businessmen. No great effort has been made to recruit students, although some have joined. Many nationalities are included, and the Society is particularly pleased to welcome its members from the Middle East.

Has BSMES succeeded in its aims? Certainly it has provided a meeting place for those interested in different aspects of the Middle East. Some businessmen and journalists have complained that it is too academic. Some academics simulate horror at the thought of non-academic discussions. Probably, therefore, the balance is about right. The Society has also emerged both as a pressure group and spokesman, and as the only body capable of organizing certain projects. A valuable feature of the Society's life is the opportunity it provides for representatives of different universities to discuss problems of mutual interest, to arrange exchanges of teachers and students. There remains much to be done in this field, especially at a time when there is the danger of losing established posts on the retirement of the holders.

Publications

The first four volumes of the BSMES *Bulletin* were published commercially. BSMES has now taken over the entire responsibility for production and publication. Its success is very largely due to the devotion of its editor, Dr. Derek Latham of Manchester University. Editorial policy has aimed to include a range of different items:

- academic articles (often papers given at the annual conference);
- reports and news of university and other activities; and
- a bibliographical and book review section.

An occasional *Newsletter* is also produced, which can provide more up-to-date news concerning, for example, recent appointments or visiting scholars' schedules. BSMES cooperates with MESA in the production of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. The editor of the review section, Dr. Michael Cook of SOAS, is one of four BSMES members of the editorial board.

Conferences and Seminars

The annual conference is a very different affair from that of MESA.

A program committee chooses three or four themes and invites up to ten speakers to prepare short papers. One theme is taken as the leading motif in 1979 it was the role of Sufi movements. The papers presented on this theme are to be published in a collective volume. The other themes are carefully chosen to cover a broad spectrum of interest. A distinguished speaker is also invited to deliver the keynote address; these in the past have included the British ambassador to Syria, the last British Resident in the Gulf, and the chairman of the World of Islam Festival. Although it is hoped that all the sessions will interest all members, some provision is made for more specialized interests, such as Turkish or Persian studies, or libraries. Numbers of those attending the conference are limited and do not much exceed 100.

It is planned in the future to hold in addition one-day seminars on specific themes, the proceedings of which may also be published.

Listings of Research

Two projects are being undertaken under this head. A member of BSMES, Dr. Peter Sluglett of Durham University, is publishing a list of completed theses on Middle Eastern topics. He is also helping to compile a computer listing of theses in progress at all British universities. This list will be available for consultation by all members of the Society.

Arabic Studies Abroad

Much attention has been paid in British universities to the problems students of Arabic encounter in finding suitable Arabic courses in institutions in the Middle East. The closure of the Middle East Centre for Arabic Studies in Shemlan has added to these difficulties. BSMES has undertaken to study the possibilities of establishing a one-year course in an Arab country for all British students of Arabic. Members of the Society have had discussions with the various bodies concerned in Britain and the Arab world. Although progress is slow, the Society has at least proved its value as a coordinating group. A one-day conference of British teachers of Arabic was held to discuss the project.

Representative Function

The Society has been unofficially recognized as a spokesman for Middle Eastern studies in Great Britain. It set up a committee in 1978 to visit universities to discuss the development of Middle Eastern studies since the publication of the Hayter Report, and to ascertain whether funds had been eroded and posts frozen or abolished. The University Grants Committee (the body responsible for distributing finance to universities) has asked to see the committee's report on its completion. The information in this report will certainly be useful, but it is not expected that it will elicit many financial benefits, especially in the present economic climate in Britain.

Library Cooperation

The Middle East Libraries Committee (MELCOM) was established in 1967, also as a result of the Hayter Report. Its function is to coordinate the purchasing and other policies in the Middle Eastern field of British libraries. It has worked in close cooperation with BSMES, Albert Hourani having been president and the present writer secretary of both bodies. One session of the annual conference is devoted to

library affairs and the bibliographical section of the *Bulletin* is edited by the secretary of MELCOM.

All members of MESA are very welcome as members of BSMES and, indeed, several already are. Information and application forms may be obtained from: Derek Hopwood, Secretary, BSMES, 68 Woodstock Road, Oxford OX2 6JF, England.

Middle East Librarians' Association

MELA, the Middle East Librarians' Association, was formally organized during the 1972 MESA meeting in Binghamton and incorporated as a "private, non-profit, non-political organization of librarians and others interested in those aspects of librarianship which support the study or dissemination of information about the Middle East since the rise of Islam." Its purpose, as stated in the bylaws, was to

...facilitate communication among members through meetings and publications; to improve the quality of area librarianship through the development of standards for the profession and for the education of Middle East library specialists; to compile and disseminate information concerning Middle East libraries and collections, and represent the judgment of the members in matters affecting them; to encourage cooperation among members and Middle East libraries, especially in the acquisition of materials and the development of bibliographic controls; to cooperate with other library and area organizations in projects of mutual concern and benefit; to promote research in and development of indexing and automated techniques as applied to Middle East materials.

For several years prior to that memorable and rainy afternoon in Binghamton, a few specialist librarians had often discussed creating an organization to serve their special interests. These librarians were employed in hastily building up large and competing collections to meet the needs—real and imagined—of the major Middle East centers of the day. At that time the American Library Association virtually ignored the problems of non-Western specialists; and even after an "Asian" section was created in ALA, the few Middle Eastern librarians who could afford ALA dues found themselves lost in a crowd of Indian and Chinese librarians.

When MESA was founded in 1967 in response to the desires of social scientists interested in Middle East studies, "library science" was included in their recognized disciplines. Indeed, a Library Panel was included in the first MESA meeting (Chicago, December 8-9, 1967). Of special interest to Middle Eastern librarians was the 1967-1968 Committee for Research and Training which, under the inspired and energetic direction of Prof. William Schorger (Michigan), set out to determine the "needs of the field." It is significant in the history of MELA that the five-member RAT Committee of 1967-68 included one political scientist/librarian, the late Labib Zuwiyya-Yamak (Harvard). A Library Subcommittee of RAT was set up and, with MESA funding, met several times during 1968, and later to outline in detail the areas in which libraries and librarians could facilitate the progress of Middle Eastern studies in this country. One of the goals was the creation of a special library organization. The four years from 1968 to 1972 saw momentum grow slowly as the workers in the field increasing-