

OBITUARY NOTICE

David Samuel Margoliouth

1858–1940

It would be no exaggeration to say that for the last thirty-five years Professor Margoliouth was, in the eyes of lay and learned alike, the leading Arabic scholar in England. By virtue of his publications, learning and personality, and the position which he held in this Society, he was regarded in the international circle of Orientalists as the chief representative of Oriental Studies in Great Britain, while his long tenure of the Laudian Professorship at Oxford had contributed to give him an almost legendary reputation amongst non-Orientalists and even in the Islamic countries of the East.

In his youth and early days at Oxford he had been a classic, and it was in his study of the Arabic versions of Aristotle's *Poetics*, issued in 1887, that he first displayed his talents as an Arabic scholar. In the years following his appointment to the Laudian Chair in 1889, a series of erudite publications—the Arabic papyri at the Bodleian Library (1893), a translation of part of Baiḍāwī's Koran-Commentary (1894), and the Letters of Abu'l-'Alā (1898)—testified to his mastery of some of the most difficult and intricate branches of Arabic literature. After his marriage to Miss Jessie Payne Smith in 1896, he was largely occupied in collaboration with her on her father's *Thesaurus Syriacus*, but found time to issue a number of biblical studies, mostly of a controversial kind.

With the appearance of *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam* in the "Heroes of the Nations" series in 1905, Margoliouth for the first time came before the wider public as an interpreter of Islam. This essay was followed by *Mohammedanism* in the Home University Library in 1911, and a more important series of Hibbert Lectures on the *Early Development of Mohammedanism*, published in 1914, as well as a number of articles contributed to various encyclopædias. All three books had a substantial success, and have stood for a generation as the standard English works on their subjects. Amongst Orientalists, however, they had a somewhat mixed reception.

The solid learning which had gone into the making of them was universally respected, and the last of the three especially threw new light on many disputed questions. But the ironical tone which informed his observations disturbed many of his European and sometimes infuriated his Muslim readers. The soundness of his judgment was inevitably called in question where insight rather than literary scholarship was demanded. A similar reception met the publication in 1924 of his Schweich Lectures on the *Relations between Arabs and Israelites*, in spite of their masterly handling of the scattered evidences in ancient inscriptions and literary traditions.

But the criticism of other, and often less qualified, scholars seldom moved him from his convictions. Yet once at least he made a partial recantation, in face of the all-but universal (though for the most part silent) astonishment which greeted his article, published in this *Journal* in 1925, deriding the authenticity of all Arabic poetry ascribed to the pre-Islamic period. The view which he maintained rested in fact less upon the arguments adduced in his paper on this occasion than upon a peculiar conception of poetry in general which he had expressed in a number of other contexts. But though he never, to my knowledge, admitted the genuineness of any pre-Islamic poem, a remark made in the course of a review two years afterwards (*Journal*, 1927, pp. 903-4), suggested that his later views were less clear-cut than those which he had originally put forward.

It was in editing and translating Arabic texts that Margoliouth's scholarship found its most congenial field. His prodigious memory, which carried without effort the fruits of a vast range of reading in many languages, was an unequalled instrument for this task. The series of volumes of Yāqūt's *Dictionary of Learned Men* (1907-1927) was his most celebrated editorial achievement. But to some Arabists his less famous texts—the turgid and allusive Letters of Abu'l-'Alā and the discursive "Table-Talk" of at-Tanūkhī

(1921)—gave a more brilliant exhibition of his powers. As a translator he combined scrupulous accuracy with ease of diction, displayed more especially in his versions of the Chronicle of Miskawaih (1920), the "Table-Talk" (1922), and the "Devil's Delusion" of Ibn al-Jauzī which appeared serially in recent issues of *Islamic Culture*.

Margoliouth's services to this Society scarcely need to be recalled here. The award of the Gold Medal to him in 1938 was primarily a tribute to scholarship, but expressed also our appreciation of the unwearied care he had given for more than twenty years to the Society's affairs, as member of Council, Vice-President, and Director. Other honours also came to him, amongst them the Fellowship of the British Academy, the D.Litt. of Durham University, and honorary membership of the German Oriental Society. He had frequently visited the Near East, and, with that generous enthusiasm for great scholars, in spite of religious differences, which distinguishes the Arab peoples, he was everywhere welcomed and honoured. When the Arabic Academy was founded at Damascus in 1920, he was among the first foreign scholars to be elected to its ranks, and in 1929 he was invited to lecture in the University of Calcutta.

As with most great scholars, his time and his stores of learning were placed with generous readiness at the disposal of every genuine applicant. Though as a teacher he may have expected too much of the beginner, the productions of his research students demonstrate the debt which they owed to his patient guidance. Strangers found him reserved, formal, perhaps a little formidable, but on closer acquaintance they were surprised to discover not only friendliness and gentleness, but a quick sense of humour. At Oxford, he enjoyed the reputation of something of a "character", but his closest friends and colleagues had an affectionate esteem for him, both as a man and a scholar.