FOREWORD

Exciting things are happening in Arabic-Islamic intellectual history. The present collection of articles is an example of what new methodologies and new formulations of old questions can yield by way of insights. It is therefore a pleasure and a privilege to be asked to write a Foreword to this volume, one which sets out to show what a younger generation of Arabists and Islamicists can bring to a discipline which, in the West at least, can be traced back to the Renaissance of the twelfth century.

As this volume of essays demonstrates, there are several reasons for this excitement. The first and most visible in my view is the new and more systematic attention being paid by younger scholars to current theoretical breakthroughs in intellectual and cultural history. Such postulates as speech-act theory, theories of representation, new quantitative methodologies, textual theories, new historicist theories, the impact of contemporary social science theory and, in particular, a number of prominent modern theorists like Clifford Geertz and Michel Foucault, have all combined to deepen our understanding of classical Arabic culture and literature.

The second reason emanates from the first. By invoking new methodologies and in asking new questions, these essays are helping to bring the field of pre-modern Arabic-Islamic culture into line with what is already happening in adjacent fields, e.g. the study of medieval Europe. My generation of students of classical Arabic culture had not been as open to theory as this younger generation is. Thus, we would occasionally cast envious eyes at other medievalist colleagues, at the theoretical freshness and vividness of their work, the windows they opened onto subjects and themes there for the grasping in our own immensely rich Arabic sources. Why did we not attempt a classical Arabic *Montaillou*? An Arabic Peter Brown's *Augustine*? A study à la Le Goff's *Intellectuals*?

I am delighted that this collection of essays shows that we are now taking firm steps in that direction. In one area at least our sources are incomparably richer: the area of biography. No pre-modern civilization known to me teems with so many people, with flesh and blood individuals, men and women, as does classical Arabic. A

new generation of Arabists shall knock, and a hundred doors will open.

The third reason concerns the closer attention now being paid by Western Arabists to the work being done by their colleagues in the Arab world writing in Arabic. For many of us who studied our own civilization in the West, the work of fellow Arab scholars was a dim and distant echo. I note with pleasure that the authors of this collection of essays are far more aware than was my generation of the contributions of modern scholarship in Arabic. There is no need to emphasize the trite observation that our "pursuit" should be "common" (I borrow from F.R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit*) and no excuse not to make it so with the Internet now at our fingertips. Within the contemporary world of literary and historical scholarship in Arabic, the North African zone seems currently to be one of the most promising. One is tempted to observe that today the North Africans are playing the role, which one might call theoretically daring, that was once played by the Andalusians.

A fourth and final reason to welcome this volume is that several contributions seem to go off the beaten track, that is to say the canon of "great texts," in order to investigate the rhetoric of texts not commonly regarded as part of that canon. This in itself is a highly desirable invitation to reconsider one major concern of intellectual history today, the debate surrounding what one might call the canon and the sub-canon. Let me illustrate. Among the more fascinating essays of William Hazlitt is one entitled "My First Acquaintance with Poets," where he draws a portrait of Coleridge as a conversationalist, a portrait that must itself rank as part of the canon of English essay writing. One passage runs as follows:

> He considered Bishop Butler as a true philosopher, a profound and conscientious thinker, a genuine reader of nature and of his own mind. He did not speak of his *Analogy*, but of his *Sermons at the Rolls' Chapel*, of which I had never heard. Coleridge somehow always contrived to prefer the *unknown* to the *known*.[1] [Hazlitt's Italics]

It may very well be that Coleridge was an early champion of the sub-canon. He may also, of course, have been showing off; in this

[1] William Hazlitt: *The Fight and Other Writings*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 2000, 254. I presume that when a text becomes a Penguin Classic, this is one entry point into the canon.

particular case, however, he was not, since Hazlitt eventually read the *Sermons* and did indeed find them superior to the better-known works. But apart from such considerations, there exists that which concerns our own field in the contemporary debate over the concept of the canon alluded to above. The terms of that debate are eloquently put by Annabel Brett:

> Languages and discourses conceived in this way are not limited to elite productions, a few "great texts." The great texts are written in idioms or rhetorics which may be shared with many not-so-great texts of the most varied provenance: occasional pamphlets, cheap novels, newspapers—they are all grist to the intellectual historian's mill. *For although the "great texts" may and will always fascinate, they did not invent the languages in which they speak (albeit they may move them on or subvert them in some way), and hence making sense of what they are about can never be limited to their study alone.*[2] [My Italics]

Given the immense volume of our medieval Arabic materials, both canon and sub-canon, it seems to me that the time has come for us to enrich this debate. The volume to which I am privileged to pen this brief message of welcome is surely a harbinger of that time.

Tarif Khalidi Beirut, February 2005

[2] Annabel Brett: What is Intellectual History Now?, in: David Cannadine (ed.): *What is History Now*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002, p. 118.