MEM Awards

Remarks by the Recipient of the 2023 MEM Lifetime Achievement Award
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Carole Hillenbrand

University of Edinburgh & University of St. Andrews

Please accept my most sincere gratitude for being chosen to receive the Middle East Medievalists 2023 Lifetime Award. It is indeed an honor to join this rollcall of luminaries.

My interest in other countries and languages began when, as a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl, I went to Paris for an exchange visit to my pen pal. This was the first of many annual visits to France, which ended with a year in Burgundy teaching English at a convent school. I also visited Germany several times, staying with local families and bringing my German up to speed. My sixth-form years were spent intensively studying Latin, as well as German and French, ending with a major scholarship in French to Girton College, Cambridge. There I also studied medieval Latin and Romance linguistics, which involved going to Bucharest in summer 1964 on a Rumanian language course. These were golden years.

I then moved to the Ministry of Aviation in London where I worked from 1965–67 as an Administrative Class Civil Servant, dealing with the financing of new aircraft, such as the Concord, and acting as an interpreter for Francophone Moroccan airline officials eager to secure a slot at Heathrow.

I did not, however, give up my interest in matters academic. In the evenings I began studying for an M.Phil. at London University, concentrating on medieval French versions of the Alexander Romance. But fate took a hand, for in spring 1967 I met my future husband, Robert Hillenbrand, another Civil Servant. At the end of our first date, he suggested we give up our jobs and go to Turkey for the summer. Which we duly did, traversing most of the country, hitchhiking and sleeping rough throughout eastern Turkey in particular. We had many adventures, but that's another story.

On our return home I gave up my medieval project and took a job teaching modern languages at a secondary school in London, while Robert began a diploma in Islamic art at Oxford. We got married in spring 1968, and I joined him in Oxford in the autumn to embark

on Middle Eastern studies. So, I went to Somerville College (without an appointment!) and asked to see the Principal, Barbara Craig. She graciously agreed to meet me. I told her about my wish to do another B.A. degree, this time in Middle Eastern Studies and Arabic. To my amazement she said "yes" immediately and invited me to start my studies the following academic year, adding that I would be the first undergraduate ever to study Arabic in the college. She explained that she was an archaeologist and had lived for five years in Baghdad. Lucky me.

Learning Arabic proved both fascinating and difficult, but I was fortunate to be taught by scholars, expert in different aspects of modern and classical Arabic. In 1969–70 I took a break from my undergraduate degree to go to Iran with Robert, whose doctoral thesis required a year of fieldwork there. Living and working in Iran for a whole year was a transformative experience. It was natural for me to start learning Persian. I also taught English to a class of fifty young men in Tehran University. On resuming my Arabic and Islamic history degree in Oxford, I also began studying Turkish. But I realized even at the end of my degree that it would take a very long time for me to master Arabic, Turkish, and Persian to the requisite level. By then I was expecting my first child, born in September 1972, and in the autumn I joined my husband in Edinburgh, where he had been appointed Lecturer in Islamic Art at the university.

I then began a Ph.D. in the Department of Islamic Studies at Edinburgh where my supervisor was John Walsh, a very experienced Turcologist. My chosen Ph.D. topic was an edition, translation, and commentary devoted to a twelfth-century Arabic text, the *Taʾrīkh Mayyāfāriqīn* of Ibn al-Azraq al-Fāriqī, which survives in two un-vocalized manuscripts in the British Library. Although this task had defeated earlier scholars, it interested me greatly because it dealt with the medieval Artuqid Turkish dynasty in eastern Turkey, the remote area we had visited in 1967. So, I worked laboriously on microfilms of these two rare Arabic manuscripts. Progress was slow because of the difficulty of deciphering the texts, as well as my commitments as a mother looking after our two small daughters. Thus, for several years I could only study in the evenings alongside working as a teacher of French and German at a local Catholic boys' school. However, seven years later, in 1979, I was awarded the Ph.D., and that same year I became a Lecturer in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at Edinburgh University.

My working conditions were very difficult. I was the only woman in the department, and it often seemed that my male colleagues wanted me there only to serve them tea and coffee. Nor was this attitude confined to them: I well remember being tasked with welcoming the delegates of the conference of European Arabists when their meeting took place in Edinburgh. Several patriarchal European colleagues clearly mistook me for the cloakroom attendant, casually handing me their overcoats as I welcomed them to the conference.

My teaching timetable was very full. The Head of Department, William Montgomery Watt, soon told me that he was retiring, and he blithely transferred to me, an inexperienced newcomer, the supervision of all fourteen of his doctoral students: an impossible action nowadays. Their range of subjects was truly daunting. Additionally, I was given the crucial task of teaching elementary Arabic to first- and second-year undergraduates. This involved five Arabic classes a week per course for the whole academic year, plus a mountain of

marking. I also taught a three-term course on pre-modern Islamic history to a large class of first-year undergraduates, which increased over the years to well over a hundred students. Thus, I gradually acquired a solid knowledge of Islamic history from the rise of Islam to the gunpowder empires of early modern times. So, there was little time for research in the first few years of my job. I did, however, travel during the 1980s to many Arabic-speaking countries, including Morocco, Syria, Jordan, Yemen and Egypt.

Postgraduates continued to flood in. By the time I retired in 2008, I had been the principal supervisor of 59 postgraduates, almost all of them doctoral candidates. They came from across the Muslim world, as well as from Japan, Germany, Greece, North America, and Britain. Their range of subjects was immense, covering many topics concerning the Qurʾan, Islamic law, Sunni Islam, Shiʿism, Sufism and classical Islamic history, thought, and culture. And in more recent years several students wrote valuable Ph.D. theses on Muslim-Christian relations. Very few of these students were native English speakers, so laborious copy-editing (which was my own choice) complicated and increased my work as supervisor.

Despite my heavy teaching load in the 1980s, I began to prepare my first book. Ehsan Yarshater, the editor of the famous forty-volume history of the celebrated Arabic scholar al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), asked me to prepare an English translation of volume 27, *The Waning of the Umayyad Caliphate*, which was published in 1989. That project made me engage seriously both with Umayyad poetry and with Umayyad chancery high prose, a new and challenging experience. A year later my Ph.D. thesis was published unchanged as a book entitled *A Muslim Principality in Crusader Times: The Early Artuqid State*.

My third book, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*, broke new ground. In 1982 the Head of Edinburgh University Press, Archie Turnbull, had asked me to become editor of their prestigious *Islamic Surveys* series. I was very happy to accept this invitation and have subsequently become the editor of two other series for the press. Archie also tried to persuade me to write a book about the Crusades—not a conventional history, but one viewed entirely through the prism of medieval Muslim sources—to provide a counterbalance to centuries of biased Eurocentric scholarship on this subject. That was a tall order; indeed, it was only ten years later, in 1992, that I could begin to write the book, when I was lucky enough to gain a research award freeing me from all departmental responsibilities for two years. It was exciting to contemplate a book that would reach an audience outside the charmed circle of Middle East specialists. As it took on more definite shape and as I broadened my reading, I realized how thoroughly the entire history of the Crusades had been colonized by Western historians whose natural academic center of gravity lay in Europe. So, following Turnbull's advice, I began considering the Crusades from an exclusively Muslim point of view and deliberately using ***only*** Islamic sources. It is all but incredible that this task had not been attempted before, and it was my privilege to do so. The notion of looking at what happened through a consistently Muslim lens alone, "uncontaminated" by Western Christian sources, as distinct from using a few Muslim sources alongside many Christian ones, was refreshing. For me, the process of writing from this unusual standpoint revealed many new angles. Thanks to discussions with Robert, who is an Islamic art historian, I also came increasingly to value pictorial evidence as a further primary source.

The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives was published by Edinburgh University Press in 1999, coincidentally the 900th anniversary of the Crusader capture of Jerusalem. But still more relevant were the events of 9/11, which gave the distant past an unexpected relevance and importance that reverberate to this day. Indeed, the West soon learned that the al-Qaeda leader Usama bin Laden was making speeches to his followers about the infamous American "Crusaders." This book and its timing marked a turning point in my career. Russian, Indonesian, and Turkish translations followed.

My perennial interest in things Turkish led to my fourth book, *Turkish Myth and Muslim Symbol: The Battle of Manzikert*, in 2007, for which I read widely in secondary Turkish sources. In 2015 there followed *Introduction to Islam: Beliefs and Practices in Historical Perspective*, published by Thames and Hudson. This was an attempt to draw on some forty years of reading, teaching, and research to present an accessible guide to Islam for the general reader. It has already been translated into Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Italian, Hungarian, and Czech. More recently, three volumes of my collected essays have been published by Edinburgh University Press.

As for my progress at Edinburgh University, I was appointed Professor in 2000 and served as Head of Department for eleven years. In 2013 I was appointed part-time Visiting Professor at St. Andrews University, where I taught courses on both the Crusades and the Assassins until 2021. Over the years I have also enjoyed visiting appointments at Dartmouth College, Groningen University, and St. Louis University, and lecturing on cruise ships.

I have been delighted and honored to receive official, academic, and public recognition for my work over the years. In 2005 I was honored to be awarded by King ʿAbdallah of Saudi Arabia The King Faisal International Prize for Islamic Studies for my book, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*. I was only the second woman and the first non-Muslim to win this prize. In 2009 Queen Elizabeth II appointed me Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for Services to Higher Education, and in 2018 she appointed me Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for Promoting a Better Understanding of Islam. In 2016 my book, *Introduction to Islam*, won The British Academy/Nayef Al-Rodhan Prize for Global Cultural Understanding. In 2019 I received, with my husband Robert, the Medal of the Royal Asiatic Society, the Society's highest award, given periodically in recognition of outstanding contributions to the field of Asian studies. In 2021 I received a D.Litt. from St. Andrews University. I now live in Oxford where I am a Senior Associate Member of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies.

Reflecting on my career, I am struck by how Islamic studies is an area much more thinly populated in the academy than the study of medieval Western Europe. But in my own lifetime the field has attracted ever-increasing public attention in our increasingly global world. Looking back through the prism of old age, I count myself both happy and lucky to have found my way into Islamic studies after my early passion for European languages. Even today there are still opportunities galore to research many unduly neglected aspects of medieval Islamic studies. Future scholars in this field urgently need to translate and analyze as many Arabic, Persian, and Turkish texts as possible and thus to make them accessible to scholars from other disciplines.

To conclude: in the 55 years since I first began to study Arabic, Persian, and Turkish I have developed a deep respect and admiration for Islam, its history, and its culture. I have been fortunate enough to travel throughout almost all the Muslim-majority countries in the world, from Senegal to Southeast Asia. It has been a duty, but also a pleasure and an honor, to give courses on the languages, religion, history and culture of the medieval Muslim world to generations of students in Great Britain, and in the United States. And my research continues to be a source of never-ending interest and thus of happiness and fulfilment.