

OBITUARY

GEORGE F. HOURANI

1913–1984

ON the morning of September 19, 1984, George Hourani passed away quietly at his home in Williamsville, New York. Just a few days previously, he had sent the corrected manuscript of a new book (*Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics*) to the Cambridge University Press. He died as he had lived—a devoted scholar, for whom philosophy was no mere academic subject, but rather a commitment to a way of life.

George Hourani was born in Manchester, England, the oldest of three sons of Fadlo and Sumaya Hourani. He entered Oxford in 1932, receiving a B.A. with honors in philosophy and in Classical literature and history in 1936. After a year in Lebanon, he entered Princeton's Department of Oriental Studies in 1937, taking his Ph.D. in 1939. In the same year, he was named a lecturer at the Government Arab College in Jerusalem, where he would remain until 1948. Many of his students there were to become outstanding scholars in their own right, and he always took a quiet but genuine pride in their achievements and in his work with them. Throughout his entire career, in fact, Hourani was a warm advocate of his Arab students, whose worth and promise seemed to him undervalued in this country. If that situation has now changed so markedly, it is owing in large part to his efforts and those of scholars like him.

George Hourani's Jerusalem years brought an even more important milestone in his life, for in 1940 he married Celeste Habib in Heliopolis, Egypt. Her energy and wonderful vivacity were the perfect complement to his very British manners, and their devotion to each other was a quality widely noted and deeply cherished among their friends.

In 1950, Hourani was invited to join the Department of Near Eastern Studies at the University of Michigan, and there he remained until 1967, when he went to the Department of Philosophy at SUNY-Buffalo. His tenure at Michigan and Buffalo saw some frustrations, but many achievements as well. Hourani was one of the earliest of the small band of scholars who established Middle Eastern and Islamic studies as a significant field of university study in this country during the 1950s and early 1960s. By the time he went to Buffalo, the period of growth was almost over, but he found his role in the Department of Philosophy there a very rewarding one. From 1976 to 1980 he was chairman, a task which he acquitted with distinction in spite of severe budgetary problems and his own fragile health.

In 1951 Hourani published a revised version of his dissertation as *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean*—a work whose caliber is demonstrated by

three reprints (most recently in 1978) and translations into Arabic and Persian. However, his deepest interests lay with philosophy, and especially the field of ethics, in which he published his second book (*Ethical Value*) in 1956. Thereafter he focused his efforts increasingly on Islamic theology and philosophy, and then linked these fields with modern ethics in his remarkable study on the qadi ‘Abd al-Jabbar (*Islamic Rationalism*, 1971).

It is pleasant to recall that Hourani received a due share of professional honors—he was president of our Association in 1968–69 and of the American Oriental Society in 1978–79, and was awarded the title of Distinguished Professor of Islamic Culture and Thought by SUNY-Buffalo not long before his retirement.

George Hourani was a true scholar, and I believe that his contributions to our field will endure for a very long time. But his personal example should also be remembered. He believed that scholarship was a calling, and that this calling demanded the highest standard of conduct, whether one was dealing with a recalcitrant text, a professional problem, or personal and family life. His sense of loyalty and integrity was deep-rooted, and so far as I can recall he never deviated from these qualities. On a broader scale, he was committed to the search for some way in which the peoples of the Middle East might be brought to live together peaceably and constructively. Violence and intolerance saddened him deeply; in his last years he was seeking more anxiously than ever to find ways to lay these demons to rest. In this dark and troubled period, his humanity and intelligent concern will surely be missed. To his widow Celeste and his brothers Albert and Cecil, we extend our heartfelt sympathy.

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