

JOSEPH BRADIN ROBERTS
1950–1990

JOSEPH BRADIN ROBERTS was born in Philadelphia on August 26, 1950, the son of Joseph B. and Eleanore Roberts. On July 14, 1984, he married Diane L. Shoos, an assistant professor of French and visual studies. He died of cancer in Hancock, Michigan, on September 20, 1990. At the time of his death, he was a continuing part-time assistant professor in humanities and social sciences at Michigan Technological University in Houghton, Michigan. At the Ohio State University, where he received all of his degrees, Dr. Roberts served as a teaching assistant in a variety of courses, and as outreach coordinator and associate director of the Middle East Studies Center.

Dr. Roberts' entry into Islamic studies was something of an accident. He enrolled in Marilyn Waldman's first class at Ohio State in 1971. The course was too new to be in the catalog, so it was listed as "Group Studies." On learning that the subject of the course was to be early Islamic history, he made his disappointment evident: he expected it to be about Tudor and Stuart England and asked why it could not be changed. Skeptical of the answer, he stayed anyway, and in 1973 finished his B.A. in Islamic history and decided to enter the doctoral program in the same field.

Dr. Roberts' Master's thesis was entitled "Images of the Shūra." In it he compared several early Arabic accounts of the Shūra and demonstrated just how big a role historians' own political values played in their presentations. He received his M.A. in 1977. For his doctoral dissertation, "Early Islamic Historiography: Ideology and Methodology," supervised by Marilyn Waldman, Stephen Dale, and Cornell Fleischer, he focused on Hadith-oriented methodologies, aided by a year's research in Cairo on an ARCE Fellowship. Unconvinced by the common assumption that the stringing together of Hadith discouraged interpretation, he theorized that this technique might have liberated Muslim historians to say what they wanted without having to be responsible for it. Having finished the dissertation while teaching at Michigan Tech, he received the Ph.D. degree in 1986. Thus had his accidental discovery of a demanding field culminated in a major personal and professional accomplishment.

Even more remarkable, Dr. Roberts sustained his love of these subjects and his determination to teach and study them, under the most difficult of circumstances, professional and, ultimately, personal. When he arrived at Michigan Tech, he found little interest in the Islamic world, so he taught first-year English composition, incorporating materials from his own field whenever possible. Gradually, using the gentle and tenacious persuasion for which he was so well known, he won approval to teach other courses, such as "Intercultural Communication," "Bible as Literature," and "Current International Tensions," in which he focused on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Without the elaborate support and encouragement most scholars require, he continued to attend professional meetings and to deliver papers. He was to be on a panel at the 1989 Middle East Studies Association meetings, but by then he had just suffered the first episode in his illness and was undergoing diagnosis and treatment. Defying periodic episodes of aphasia and speech interruption, he still managed to propose a paper for the 1990 meeting; in fact, his name appeared on the preliminary program. Just two months before his death, he wrote a letter about his plans for his paper. He was trying to grapple with one of the most difficult challenges in early Islamic history, describing the process by which Muslims separated into the groups we know of today. To quote his own words,

I'm still looking at the Ghulāt and working on the assumption that they were not a proto-Shī'ī phenomenon, but, more generally, the result of the establishment of a new religion and polity. In their speculations they, like many other Muslims, were engaged in exploring the limitations and implications of a new monotheism. As you can see, I'm still struggling with the language. I don't see them as a group with a name and I'm not sure where that leaves me. The most progress I've made is in looking at conversion and at tensions created by a growing number of Mawālī and competition between partisan groups. Does it make sense to see the tensions helping some Muslims to find or explore messianic expectations or to join opposition groups such as Mukhtar's. I wish there were more on the Mawālī . . .

To all who knew him, Dr. Roberts was above all a decent, generous, and compassionate human being, able to show real concern for the interests and problems of others. He showed the same grace under pressure during his illness that he showed in the rest of his life. And he showed just how far a love for our field can carry it into new environments. In that respect, he represents the new kinds of challenges our field faces as a result of its recent expansion, especially into the large public universities. Dr. Roberts is survived by his wife, his mother, and his two sisters. The family has asked those who wish to honor his life to send donations to the Mayo Clinic, Division of Oncology, Melanoma Research, c/o Dr. E. T. Creagan, 200 1st Street S.W., Rochester, Minnesota 55905-0199.

MARILYN WALDMAN
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