

D. S. Margoliouth and Arabic

ARABIC AT OXFORD BEFORE MARGOLIOUTH

In his *Dictionary of National Biography* entry on D. S. Margoliouth, his pupil A. F. L. Beeston, later his successor, remarked that it was strange that, although a brilliant polyglot, Margoliouth was elected to the Laudian chair in 1889 (at the age of only 31) without having given any proof that he knew Arabic.¹ It does seem strange if you think of the Laudian chair now and the distinguished Arabists who have held it since Margoliouth,² but it is worth noting that, under the reformed statute of 1881, the prescribed electoral board was to consist of the Secretary of State for India, the President of St John's, the Regius Professor of Hebrew, the Boden Professor of Sanskrit and Bodley's Librarian—not an Arabist among them.³ Also, the holder of the chair was expected to teach not only Arabic, but Syriac and 'Chaldee' (Aramaic). Even so, you might think that the occupant of the third oldest chair of Arabic in Europe ought to have been a published Arabic scholar.⁴ But this would be to suppose that the Laudian chair had been held by a succession of brilliant and productive Arabists since it was founded in 1636, which was far from the case. Margoliouth was the 10th Laudian professor. Of the previous nine, all were poor fish except for the very first, Edward Pococke (1604–1691), who occupied the chair from its founding until his death.⁵ At best, Pococke's successors were barely interested in Arabic. Margoliouth's immediate predecessor, Robert Gandell (*d.* 1887; Laudian 1861–87), was a Hebraist.⁶ Gandell's predecessor, Stephen Reay (Laudian 1840–61), had been under-librarian for Oriental books at the Bodleian; apparently he was a very nice man, chiefly remembered for 'his habits of pottering around the library in search of his spectacles and hovering over hot-air gratings in search of warmth'.⁷ Both of these nonentities held the chair for over 20 years each, as did most of the six Laudians who came before them, who all (except for Knatchbull) died in office, but between them contributed almost nothing to Arabic studies in the way of publications, let alone durable works of scholarship,

¹ A. F. L. Beeston, 'Margoliouth, David Samuel (1858–1940)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (28 September 2006) <<https://doi-org/10.1093/ref:odnb/34874>> (Accessed: 7 February 2026): 'the dossier of recommendations that he submitted contained not a single allusion to any knowledge of Arabic, and only two mentioned his qualifications in Hebrew and Syriac.' The documents are held in the Bodleian at G. A. Oxon 4° 103(3), 'Documents and testimonials in support of mr. [sic] Margoliouth's candidature for the Laudian professorship of Arabic'. This was Margoliouth's second attempt to be elected.

² H. A. R. Gibb (1895–1971; Laudian 1937–55), A. F. L. Beeston (1911–1995; Laudian 1955–79), W. Madelung (1930–2023; Laudian 1978–98), G. J. H. van Gelder (1947–, Laudian 1998–2012). For the first time in its history, it was held by a woman from 2012; reendowed and renamed in 2016 as the AlBabtain-Laudian chair, it has been held since 2022 by Tahera Qutbuddin, the first Muslim to occupy the position.

³ University Statute of 1881, *Statutes made for the University of Oxford and for the Colleges and Halls therein, by the University of Oxford Commissioners acting in pursuance of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge Act, 1877: Approved by the Queen in Council* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1883), pp. 91–2. The statute also attached the chair to St John's College, where it has stayed since H. A. R. Gibb was elected; Margoliouth, however, remained at New College.

⁴ The three chairs of Arabic that have been almost continuously occupied from their founding until now are Leiden (1613), the Sir Thomas Adams chair in Cambridge (1632) and the Laudian.

⁵ There is an extensive bibliography on Pococke, a pivotal figure in 17th-century English intellectual life, beginning with Leonard Twells (ed.), *The Theological Works of the Learned Dr. Pococke . . . To which is prefixed, An Account of his Life and Writings*, 2 vols. (London: Printed for the Editor, 1740). The standard modern reference work for Pococke remains G. J. Toomer, *Eastern Wisdom and Learning: The Study of Arabic in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); meanwhile the study of 17th to 18th-century European Arabic scholarship is a rapidly expanding field.

⁶ D. S. Margoliouth, revised Elizabeth Baigent, 'Gandell, Robert (1818–1887)', *ODNB* (23 September 2004) <<https://doi-org/10.1093/ref:odnb/10330>> (Accessed: 7 February 2026). Even his publications on Hebrew were sparse: an edition of a 17th-century New Testament commentary, and entries on Amos, Nahum and Zephaniah for the multi-authored *Speaker's Commentary* on the bible edited by F. C. Cook (London 1871).

⁷ D. S. Margoliouth, revised Elizabeth Baigent, 'Reay, Stephen [*pseud.* Pileus Quadratus] (1782–1861)', *ODNB* (23 September 2004) <<https://doi-org/10.1093/ref:odnb/23239>> (Accessed: 7 February 2026).

let alone training anyone to succeed them and build up the field.⁸ To set these men in context, there was an ‘absence of any recognized position for Arabic in [18th-century Oxford’s] curriculum . . . and, partly no doubt in consequence, an almost complete absence of students to be taught . . . lectures [on] Arabic were long held only in the vacation . . . and by the end of the [eighteenth] century, the Laudian professor was not lecturing [on] Arabic.’⁹ This situation continued into the 19th century.

Things had not been all that much better in Cambridge, with its two Arabic chairs, the Sir Thomas Adams chair—four years older than the Laudian chair—and the Lord Almoner’s chair.¹⁰ But they were beginning to pick up around the time of Margoliouth’s appointment. William Wright, who held the Sir Thomas Adams chair for nearly 30 years until his death in 1889—the year Margoliouth was elected to the Laudian—was a distinguished Semitic scholar, now remembered by Arabists mainly for his translation of Caspari’s Arabic grammar.¹¹ William Robertson Smith, who followed him briefly, was a pioneering Semitic anthropologist, publishing *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* in 1885. Unlike the mediocre Laudian professors, both men were part of a European republic of Arabic, Semitic and Middle Eastern letters.¹²

But otherwise, the important things that were happening in Arabic scholarship in Britain were happening outside the universities; and this had been the situation since the end of the seventeenth century. Endowments meant that there were chairs of Arabic at Oxford and Cambridge, but there was no tradition of teaching and research. Nearly all the pioneering and durable scholarship in Arabic was done outside the universities throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. George Sale (1696–1736), who was famous for his 1734 translation of the Qur’an, and still more for its *Preliminary Discourse* vindicating Islam, was a solicitor. Sir William Jones (1746–1794), whose translations of Persian and Arabic poetry were a literary landmark in

⁸ These six were, in order of tenure, Thomas Hyde (1691–1703), a Hebraist and Persianist rather than Arabist, see Allan V. Williams, ‘Hyde, Thomas,’ *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (15 December 2004) <https://doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_3285> (Accessed: 8 February 2026); John Wallis (1703–38), whose ‘persistent absenteeism’ exasperated the Vice-Chancellor, L. S. Sutherland, ‘The Origin and Early History of the Lord Almoner’s Professorship in Arabic at Oxford,’ *The Bodleian Library Record* 10 (June 1980), 166–177, at p. 172; Thomas Hunt (1738–74), whose ‘conspicuous failure to produce a major work of scholarship has been ascribed to a lack of self-confidence’, Colin Wakefield, ‘Hunt, Thomas (1696–1774),’ *ODNB* (3 January 2008) <<https://doi-org/10.1093/ref:odnb/14207>> (Accessed: 7 February 2026); Joseph White (1774–1814): Margoliouth calls his edition of the Syriac Philoxenian version of the gospels (1778) ‘a scholarly and accurate work based on four manuscripts acquired from Mesopotamia by Gloucester Ridley, fellow of New College,’ D. S. Margoliouth, revised J. M. Mercer, ‘White, Joseph (*bap.* 1746, *d.* 1814),’ *ODNB* (23 September 2004) <<https://doi-org/10.1093/ref:odnb/29259>> (Accessed: 7 February 2026); Thomas Winstanley, Camden professor of history, who was also Laudian 1814–24; and Wyndham Knatchbull (1823–40, *d.* 1868), who produced a slim edition with Latin notes of al-Zawzani’s commentary on the pre-Islamic poet al-Ḥarith ibn Ḥilliza’s *mu‘allaqa* (1820) and a translation of Silvestre de Sacy’s Arabic edition of the animal fables *Kalila wa-Dimna* for a general readership (1819).

⁹ Sutherland, ‘The Origin and Early History’, 173, 176, 177.

¹⁰ Oxford also had a Lord Almoner’s chair. Lord Almoner’s chairs were often held by occupants of the Laudian or Adams chairs before or jointly with these, Sutherland, ‘The Origin and Early History of the Lord Almoner’s Professorship’. The history of Lord Almoner’s chairs before the 18th century is unrecorded; appointments to them were made intermittently, and ceased in 1909 in Oxford and 1933 in Cambridge.

¹¹ On ‘Wright’s Arabic grammar’, as it is known today, and its complex ancestry, see Pierre Larcher, ‘L’étrange destin d’un livre: La soi-disant *Grammaire arabe* de William Wright (1830–1889),’ *Historiographica Linguistica* 41 (2014), 109–126.

¹² Both of them were grounded in divinity at the Scottish universities and subsequently studied in Europe, Wright in Halle and Leiden. Rejected for the post of Laudian professor in 1861, he was appointed to the Sir Thomas Adams chair in 1870, G. J. Roper, ‘Wright, William (1830–1889),’ *ODNB* (23 September 2004) <<https://doi-org/10.1093/ref:odnb/30069>> (Accessed: 7 February 2026). After Edinburgh, Smith studied in Halle, where he became friends with Julius Wellhausen, Henry R. Sefton, ‘Smith, William Robertson (1846–1894),’ *ODNB* (23 September 2004) <<https://doi-org/10.1093/ref:odnb/25939>> (Accessed: 7 February 2026). Previously, the best-known holder of the Sir Thomas Adams chair had been Simon Ockley (1711–20), whose *History of the Saracens* (1708–18) influenced Edward Gibbon and has been continuously reprinted.

the 1770s and '80s,¹³ was another lawyer, who ended his short life as a judge in Kolkata. Sir William Muir (1819–1905) wrote an influential polemical *Life of Mahomet* (1851) and history of *The Caliphate* (1891): he was an Indian civil servant. Another Indian civil servant was Sir Charles Lyall (1845–1920), a great student and literary translator of early Arabic poetry. E. W. Lane (1801–1876), whose *Arabic-English Lexicon*, like Wright's Arabic grammar, is still in use to day, supported himself as travel writer, translator and artist. All of these men were part of the wider scholarly world, but worked outside the institutional academic system.¹⁴

Compare this with the positive slew of Arabic chairs and Arabic professors elsewhere in Europe. In Paris, Antoine-Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838), since 1795 chair of Arabic at what we now call Langues O, single-handedly trained the men who were to become professors at Leipzig (H. Fleischer), Copenhagen (A. Mehren), Uppsala (C. Tornberg), Jena and Greifswald (J. Kosegarten). All these men edited texts or catalogued libraries, and we still use their work today. In Leiden, there was M. J. de Goeje (1836–1909), who edited or co-edited al-Ṭabari's mammoth *History* and the works of all the early Arabic geographers. At Greifswald, there was W. Ahlwardt, cataloguer of the great Berlin MS collections and editor of early Arabic poetry. Also at Greifswald for a while, then at Marburg and Göttingen, there was the biblical scholar Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), best known to Arabists for his work on early Islam; while in Strasbourg there was the 'prince of Arabists', Theodor Nöldeke (1836–1930), who reigned there from 1872 to 1906, in his turn training almost as many seminal scholars as Silvestre de Sacy had done. The contrast with the Laudian chair which Margoliouth inherited in 1889 is striking.

MARGOLIOUTH AS LAUDIAN PROFESSOR

However, once installed as Laudian professor, Margoliouth quickly remedied the existing state of affairs. He set new scholarly standards for Arabic research in Oxford, and gained the respect of his European peers. He also trained students in Arabic, published Arabic teaching materials, and initiated a scholarly succession.¹⁵ He did so within a wider institutional context which is summarised on the current webpage of the Faculty of Asian and Middle East Studies:

A 'Board of Studies for the Honour School of Oriental Studies' was established in 1871 but abolished in 1894 when its work was transferred to the 'Board of the Faculty of Oriental Languages', which had been set up in 1883 within the Faculty of Arts . . . [which] had three Faculty Boards: Literae Humaniores, Oriental Languages and Modern History. In Michaelmas term 1913, Oriental Languages became a Faculty of its own; in Trinity term 1914 it was renamed 'Faculty of Oriental Languages and Literature', and in 1936 it became the 'Faculty of Oriental Studies'.¹⁶

¹³ See now Catharina Gertruda Maria Janssen, "'Future Scholars, Future Poets': The Contemporary Reception of Sir William Jones's Translations of Oriental Literature, 1770–1835" (PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 2021): <<https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/id/eprint/168748/>> (Accessed: 7 February 2026).

¹⁴ On E. W. Lane, see Jason Thompson, *Edward William Lane 1801–1876: The Life of the Pioneering Egyptologist and Orientalist* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010). British popularisers of 'the history of the Arabs' were also active throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Examples are the anonymous *A Complete History of the Arabs, from the Birth of Mohammed, to the Reduction of Baghdad*. In three volumes. By the Authors of the *Universal History* (London: T. Osborne, 1761), with original sources identified in marginal notes; John Shakespear and Thomas Hartwell Horne, *The History of the Mahometan Empire in Spain* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1816); Andrew Crichton, *History of Arabia, Ancient and Modern . . . The Caliphs . . . The Civil Government . . . of the Modern Arabs . . . The Wahabees . . . The Bedouins . . . Natural History* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1833), a narrative with no notes; William Fordyce Mavor, *Universal History, Ancient and Modern . . . to . . . 1801*, of which vol. X is *The History of the Arabs* (1802, with an American edition in 1805).

¹⁵ For the purposes of this paper, I shall ignore most of his non-Arabic teaching and research.

¹⁶ Ulrike Roesler based on archival materials compiled by Anja Hollowell April 2019; revised David Rechter and Thomas Hall July 2022 <www.ames.ox.ac.uk/history-faculty-1> (Accessed: 7 February 2026)

Although, as Beeston says in his *Dictionary of National Biography* entry, Margoliouth had an average of only 1.5 undergraduate students a year to teach, and practically no graduates, he nevertheless worked hard at teaching, with very little help. (This is still the lot of Laudian professors today, with many more than 1.5 undergraduates.) He taught from his ‘small room’ in the then Indian Institute (which is now the Martin School) every weekday morning in term from 10 till 1, and was ‘always ready to give advice’ outside these times, including on Syriac and Ethiopic. His teaching was grounded in reading and commenting on texts. Apparently, the deadpan humour of some of his comments sometimes disorientated some students. The peculiarities of his teaching methods may have arisen from his being largely if not wholly self-taught (how he learned Arabic himself is not documented). Research, teaching, and the preparation of teaching materials went hand in hand: as Beeston notes, within five years of his appointment, Margoliouth had published ‘[one] piece of highly recondite scholarship, an edition of the Arabic papyri in the Bodleian’ and a translation of a standard medieval Arabic commentary on sura 3 of the Koran, which ‘remained an indispensable standby of students for the next 60 years’.

It is interesting to compare Beeston’s assessment with H. A. R. Gibb’s in his obituary of Margoliouth, since Gibb came from a very different academic background to either Margoliouth or Beeston and had different research interests.¹⁷ Gibb begins with something that could not have been said of any Laudian professor since Pococke:

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, he was regarded in the international circle of Orientalists as the chief representative of Oriental Studies in Great Britain.¹⁸

Gibb goes on to single out the same key early publications as Beeston: ‘the Arabic papyri at the Bodleian Library (1893),¹⁹ a translation of part of Baiḍāwī’s Koran-Commentary (1894),²⁰ and also ‘the Letters of Abu’l-‘Alā (1898)’.²¹ Gibb unflinchingly notes that Margoliouth’s subsequent historical publications were controversial because ‘the ironical tone which informed his observations disturbed many of his European and sometimes infuriated his Muslim readers’. He especially commends Margoliouth’s translations, which gave ‘a more brilliant exhibition of his powers. As a translator he combined scrupulous accuracy with ease of diction’.²² It is very difficult to translate Classical Arabic accurately, and even more so to combine accuracy with the flow of the original. Gibb’s appreciation (he was himself admired as a translator) is historically significant. By the last quarter of the 20th century, the criteria by which Arabic scholarship would be recognised, and indeed rewarded, would change radically in the new funding-driven research economy.

At this point, for my part, as an indirect beneficiary of Margoliouth through my own teacher, Beeston, I must say that my admiration of Margoliouth’s scholarly skills has only increased with time. His work on Arabic papyrology pioneered a field which has become central rather than

¹⁷ Gibb was at Edinburgh as an undergraduate and the London School of Oriental and African Studies as a graduate and teacher, and was a historian of the late medieval and early modern Middle East.

¹⁸ H. A. R. Gibb, ‘Obituary Notice: David Samuel Margoliouth 1858–1940’, *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 72 (1940), 392–4 at p. 392.

¹⁹ *Arabic Papyri of the Bodleian Library*, reproduced . . . with transcription and translation by D. S. Margoliouth (London: Luzac & Co., 1893).

²⁰ D. S. Margoliouth, *Chrestomothia Baidawiana: The Commentary of El-Baiḍāwī on Sura III* (London: Luzac & Co., 1894).

²¹ D. S. Margoliouth, *The Letters of Abu ’l-‘Alā of Ma’arrat Al-Nu’mān: Edited from the Leyden Manuscript, with the Life of the Author by Al-Dhababi and with Translation, Notes, Indices, and Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898). See also n. 31 below.

²² Gibb, ‘Obituary Notice’, 393, 394.

recondite, and has changed Middle Eastern social history fundamentally.²³ His choices of Arabic texts to edit were far from obvious at the time, but they were inspired, and they have transformed the field and our whole vision of the shape of medieval Arabic culture and Islamic history. His translations capture the diction and thought patterns of the originals and help us to read them better. I do not think that anything that has been written about him quite gives him his due in these two respects; and there are other aspects of his work that seem to have received almost no notice—his collaborations with other scholars and his support for them, together with his cross-cultural contacts, which are linked to his tireless work to open up Classical Arabic literature to a wide English-speaking and indeed also Arabic-speaking readership. These endeavours will be considered in the last part of this paper.

CONTROVERSY AND HUMOUR

Margoliouth's deadpan humour, if that was what it was, sometimes disorientated his fellow academics as well as his students. He had started off as a classicist. Was he winding up fellow-classicists when he claimed to have found chronograms and anagrams 'in the first seven lines of the *Iliad* and the first ten of the *Odyssey*' proving the authorship of Homer?²⁴ Robin Lane Fox assures us that he was deadly serious, even unbalanced on the subject.²⁵ Veering off in the opposite direction, into scepticism, how seriously did Margoliouth mean to be taken when, in 1925, in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, he debunked as a later forgery pre-Islamic poetry, the supreme Classical Arabic literary art form, and the icon, throughout the ages, of Arabic (and, not entirely logically, Islamic) cultural and linguistic identity? The deeply erudite Egyptian scholar Ṭāhā Ḥusayn had actually come to the same conclusion as Margoliouth independently,²⁶ and the doubt had long been present in the Classical Arabic scholarly tradition, if not in such sweeping terms. It is the same doubt that we have about all cultural icons that have been fragmented, conjecturally restored, and copied innumerable times, which we analyse word by word and brushstroke by brushstroke even though we cannot tell where the restorer or imitator has been at work. We have to believe that there was an integral original, and it makes life a lot easier to believe that whatever bit we are looking at is original. But the problem remains. And this, in fact is very much Margoliouth's argument and conclusion.²⁷ Gibb suggests that he soon gave hints of a less hard-line stance.²⁸

I like to think that it is because of his somewhat sardonic turn of mind, as illustrated in the authenticity issue, that Margoliouth became the translator and/or editor of some of the most captivating Arabic writers of the 10th to 13th centuries, al-Tanūkhī (939–994) and Miskawayh (932–1030), whom he both edited and translated, and Yāqūt, whom he only edited. Classical Arabic writing has a general leaning towards a kind of delight in human dottiness that goes with a sardonic sense of humour which Margoliouth's three chosen authors embody perfectly.

The latest in date of Margoliouth's authors, Yāqūt, died in 1229 aged only about 50. He had been a slave, taken in childhood in a raid from Anatolia. His illiterate merchant owner had him educated to act as his clerk. Yāqūt picked up an extraordinary Arabic education initially by attending whatever public teaching was available, and then by travelling and meeting scholars and burrowing into libraries. His fascination both with the written scholarly tradition and with anyone able to pass it down, and with the literary scholars of his own day, whom he interviewed, make his *Dictionary of Learned Men* a singular human as well as scholarly achievement. Margoliouth's

²³ He later catalogued the Arabic papyri in the John Rylands Library, D. S. Margoliouth, *Catalogue of Arabic Papyri in the John Rylands Library Manchester* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1933).

²⁴ Gilbert Murray, 'David Samuel Margoliouth 1858–1940', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 26 (1940), 389–97, at p. 391.

²⁵ Robin Lane Fox, 'D. S. Margoliouth's Biblical, Homeric, and Islamic Studies', *New College Notes* 25 (2026), no. 8.

²⁶ Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *Fī al-shi'r al-jahīlī* (Cairo: Maṭba'at Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1926).

²⁷ D. S. Margoliouth, 'The Origins of Arabic Poetry', *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 57 (1925), 417–49, at p. 449.

²⁸ Gibb, 'Obituary Notice', 393.

large-scale Arabic editorial career started with his editing of Yāqūt's *Dictionary of Learned Men* (Ar. *Mu'jam al-udabā'*, or *Irshād al-arīb ilā ma'rifat al-adīb*, 'The cultivated person's guide to men of letters'), which was eventually to stretch to seven volumes, and involved difficult, incomplete, and scattered MSS. The volumes appeared over several decades in two editions, from 1907 to 1927 and 1923 to 1931,²⁹ a project comparable to the great European enterprises such as de Goeje and his team's editions of al-Ṭabarī's huge *History* or of Arabic geographers. Year by year as it came out, the *Dictionary of Learned Men* was reviewed by Margoliouth's European peers—a first for a Laudian professor. Also, this was remarkable as a one-man enterprise, whereas many, though not all, comparable European publications had been collaborative. At all events, it put Oxford Arabic on the European map.

Before I move on to Margoliouth's other Arabic authors, I ought to say what it is about Yāqūt that makes Margoliouth's edition such a landmark. Most people think of Yāqūt simply as a source of information. A six-volume edition of his *Geographical Dictionary* (Ar. *Mu'jam al-buldān*) had already established itself among Orientalists as a factual research tool.³⁰ Similarly, Yāqūt's bibliographies in the *Dictionary of Learned Men*, which had been cited for centuries by medieval scholars, became an indispensable documentary resource, especially for no longer extant works, once Margoliouth made the text generally available. But if, instead of cherry-picking, you read the biographies that go with the bibliographies, you also discover a portraitist of genius. This is not often remarked upon, but I am sure it must have struck Margoliouth and helped him to keep ploughing on with his edition. It might be added that a lot of the polemical ammunition in his famous 1925 article about the authenticity or otherwise of pre-Islamic poetry is taken from Yāqūt—and is very amusing.

Meanwhile, Margoliouth had irons in other Arabic fires (not to mention his work on sources in other languages). In 1902, he edited and translated the correspondence on vegetarianism of the notoriously difficult 11th-century writer al-Ma'arrī (973–1058),³¹ whose correspondence in rhymed prose he had already edited in 1898, as noted in Gibb's obituary. In 1907, because it was on a period that interested him, he translated a work by a living Arab historian, Jurjī Zaydān (1861–1914).³² His next large-scale solo excursion as editor, and this time as translator as well, was the surviving parts of the 10th-century al-Tanūkhī's henceforth famous *Table-Talk of a Mesopotamian Judge* (Ar. *Nishwār al-muḥāḍara*), which like Yāqūt's *Dictionary of Learned Men* was cited by Arabic authors (including Yāqūt) throughout the Middle Ages. Margoliouth's translation and edition were immediately exploited by modern scholars as a source for social, economic, legal, and political history, and the text, albeit usually in 'Abbūd al-Shālījī's now more easily accessible 1971–3 Beirut edition, continues to be so used.³³ As with Yāqūt's *Dictionary of Learned Men*, the editing involved difficult and scattered manuscripts, and the text and translation appeared in tranches. The first volume of translation came out in book form in London in 1922 under the imprint of the Royal Asiatic Society. Publication of the translation then continued in the journal *Islamic Culture*, edited from Hyderabad, from 1929 to 1932. In his 'Introductory Remarks' to the first of the 1929 batches,

²⁹ Both published in London by Luzac & Co. under the title *The Irshād al-arīb ilā ma'rifat al-adīb: or Dictionary of Learned Men of Yāqūt*.

³⁰ It was first edited in full by Ferdinand Wüstenfeld (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1866–71). Orientalists valued it more for its geographical and historical data than for its citations of the poetic and other literary associations that place-names evoke.

³¹ D. S. Margoliouth, 'Abu 'l-'Alā al-Ma'arrī's Correspondence on Vegetarianism', *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 34 (1902), 289–332. 'The amount of information which these letters convey seems to be very considerable, at least for the history of the "leading ideas of Islam"' (ibid., at p. 290).

³² *Umayyads and 'Abbāsids: Being the Fourth Part of Jurjī Zaydān's History of Islamic Civilization* (Leyden: E. J. Brill/London: Luzac & Co., 1907).

³³ The translation also continues to be used, however, for example by Chris Wickham, 'Administrators' Time: The Social Memory of the Early Medieval State, East and West', in *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone*, ed. Behnam Sadeghi, Asad Q. Ahmed, Adam Silverstein, and Robert Hoyland (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 430–67.

Margoliouth says: '[I have] found by experience that translating a text should precede editing, since the process calls attention to numerous difficulties which might otherwise escape it'.³⁴ (I agree.) He hoped the book would find a general readership in Arab countries as well as English-speaking ones, and for that reason left out a small number of stories he considered unsuitable for family reading.³⁵ The Arabic text was also published in batches, in the *Revue de l'Académie Arabe de Damas* or under its imprint, from 1921 to 1933. The whole of the English translation has recently been reproduced, at a prohibitive price, with the rather inaccurate title *Everyday Life in Medieval Baghdad*.³⁶

Here, abridged from the 1922 volume, is an example of what Margoliouth found appealing in al-Tanūkhī. I italicise passages whose irony might not be apparent to readers unaware that, like his father in this anecdote and many other members of his family, al-Tanūkhī was a judge (*qāḍī*). The narrator, his great-uncle Ibn Abī 'Allān, had been in government service and was a prominent landowner in lower Iraq, the bread-basket of the caliphate and al-Tanūkhī's own home ground.

I was told the following [says al-Tanūkhī] by *my father's maternal uncle* . . . Ibn Abī 'Allān . . . There was, [Ibn Abī 'Allān] said, enmity between [a certain] Ibn Qudaidah and myself, and when I had retired from official duties, he was agent for the estates of [the caliph] Muqtadir's mother, some of which were adjoining mine. He gave me great annoyance in matters of irrigation and labour, meaning to ruin my estate and humiliate me . . . [I] could find no way of stopping his resources against me and carrying the war into the enemy's country except offering to farm the Queen-mother's estates myself,³⁷ and thus getting control of his person, and demanding his accounts, and so bringing him into trouble. [Ibn Abī 'Allān writes off to the Queen Mother's secretary with this offer, but then is tormented by worrying whether it might not ruin him financially; however, he has a reassuring vision in a dream of 'an aged man with white hair and beard, *dressed like a judge*, [in blue with] red boots', who tells him he will break even after three years, 'the reward of your trouble being your retaliation on your enemy.' After considerable rigmarole and bribery, Ibn Abī 'Allān then gets his hands on Ibn Qudayda] 'and [says he] I reluctantly put Ibn Qudaidah to the torture in my house, and so extorted from him money for the Queen-mother, her secretary, and her agent . . . After some months I released him and let him return to his house, he being now heavily in debt, so that he had to sell part of his estate . . . Years passed and the enmity between Ibn Qudaidah and myself continued. [During this time, Ibn Abī 'Allān explains, there is a financial crisis, and the caliph needs to raise money and makes Ibn Abī 'Allān his agent. He says:] I decided to impose on Ibn Qudaidah twice the sum which should have fallen upon him . . . which he had no means of providing. [Ibn Abī 'Allān therefore *lends* him the money! and extracts an IOU from him, signed and witnessed.] When I was aware that he had come to extremities, I demanded of him the debt. He hid himself in his house. I demanded the aid of *the qāḍī Abu'l-Qāsim al-Tanūkhī*,³⁸ [he] wrote a demand for assistance on my behalf to the prefect of police . . . and it was arranged that I should

³⁴ 'The Table-Talk of a Mesopotamian Judge, Vol. VIII', *Islamic Culture* 3 (1929), 487–522, at p. 489. The remainder of 'Vol. VIII' was published in *Islamic Culture* 4 (1930), 1–28, 228–38, 363–88, and 531–57. Margoliouth's 'Vol. VIII' corresponds to volume eight of al-Shāhī's edition. Margoliouth's 'Part II' appeared in *Islamic Culture* 5 (1931), 169–93, 352–71, 559–81 and *Islamic Culture* 6 (1932), 47–66, 184–205, 370–96 and corresponds to volume three of al-Shāhī's edition. *The Table-Talk of a Mesopotamian Judge. Translated from the Original Arabic by D. S. Margoliouth* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1922) covers much but not all of volumes one and two of al-Shāhī's edition.

³⁵ *Table-Talk* (1922), Preface, p. vii.

³⁶ Subtitled *The Observations and Tales of a Mesopotamian Judge*, 2 vols. (London: I. B. Tauris 2018), with an introduction by Robert Irwin.

³⁷ Tax-farming is what is meant.

³⁸ The father of the author, al-Tanūkhī, who was, as stated in the introduction to the anecdote, the nephew of the narrator, Ibn Abī 'Allān.

[imprison Ibn Qudaydah privately³⁹ in] a dwelling near the qāḍī's prison, of which I should myself pay the rent . . . There [Ibn Qudayda] stayed more than a year, without paying his debt . . . Presently he became seriously ill, and his mother, *who was related to me*, came and begged me with tears to release him, which I refused to do until I was informed that he was likely to die, when I yielded to his mother's supplications, and let her take him away, *after I had made her go bail for him*. He died three days after his release, and I purchased some of his lands *with the money which he owed me*.⁴⁰

MARGOLIOUTH'S PUBLIC SERVICE TO ARABIC

I want finally to turn to a major feature of Margoliouth's life as an Arabic scholar which is not explored either in Beeston's *Dictionary of National Biography* entry or in Gilbert Murray or H. A. R. Gibb's obituaries of Margoliouth, that is, his self-sacrificing support for other scholars. He displayed this in his third great editing and translation task, published in seven volumes from 1920 to 1921 by Basil Blackwell as *The Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate: Original Chronicles of the Fourth Islamic Century*.⁴¹ In the Preface he explains how the independent scholar H. F. Amedroz had been working on an edition of Miskawayh's near-eyewitness history of 10th-century events in Iraq and western Iran:

The proofs were regularly submitted by him to the present writer, who had for many years had something like a partnership of studies with him. In October 1916 I accepted an invitation to lecture at Lahore, and in consequence of my absence from England Mr Amedroz stopped the printing which had by that time reached about the middle of Volume III. I was shocked on my return to England in April, 1917, to find that he had passed away the month before. In his will he left a sum of money for the completion of the work, including a translation, with the request that I should undertake this. I proceeded to carry out his wishes, but the work was interrupted by a journey to the East in the winter 1918–1919, undertaken in connexion with the War . . . One of the few cases wherein haste in literary matters is not only excusable but desirable is when the completion of a dead man's work is laid upon some one who is himself advanced in years.⁴²

Margoliouth was about 60. Amedroz, born in 1854, a barrister and self-taught Arabist, was a very considerable scholar of the mid-Abbasid caliphate. Practically all that is known about him is what Margoliouth wrote in his obituary for the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*.⁴³

I shall not speak about Margoliouth's Miskawayh translation, except to say that it has all the qualities I admire in his Tanūkhī translation. It is clear from his various prefatory remarks that working on a trio of authors (al-Tanūkhī, Miskawayh, and Yāqūt) who often covered the same ground greatly enriched his understanding; and he generously acknowledges how useful he found the work of other scholars. But other scholars also owed a lot to him. Another colleague whose death Margoliouth felt left him under an obligation to finish his work was Salahuddin Khuda Bakhsh (or Bukhsh), a 'barrister and Professor at the University of Calcutta' who '[s]ince

³⁹ A legal and not unusual arrangement.

⁴⁰ i.e. the bail money his mother had put up. *Table-Talk* (1922), pp. 110–17.

⁴¹ The English text was reprinted in three volumes under the same title, with a preface by Hugh Kennedy, by I. B. Tauris (London, 2015). The main author and source are Miskawayh and his *Tajārib al-umam* ('The Experiences of the Nations').

⁴² *The Eclipse*, Vol. VII, pp. i–ii.

⁴³ D. S. M., 'H. F. Amedroz', *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 49 (1917), 632–3.

his Oxford days . . . had maintained regular correspondence with [Margoliouth],⁴⁴ and was a fellow-contributor to the journal *Islamic Culture*, in which Margoliouth's 'Table-Talk' translation had appeared serially. Khuda Bakhsh had embarked on an English translation of Adam Mez's *Die Renaissance des Islams*. This work had appeared posthumously after its author's death during the First World War,⁴⁵ and drew liberally on many of the authors that Margoliouth specialised in to paint a panorama of Margoliouth's favourite period, the 10th century. Margoliouth says:

when [Khuda Bakhsh] undertook to translate the *Renaissance* for . . . *Islamic Culture* [he] asked me to peruse and make observations on the typescript before sending it to press, which I was very willing to do. The last batch of typescript was returned to me by post, marked "Addressee Dead", a great shock and grief to me, thus learning that I had lost a valued friend of long standing, while the world had lost a man peculiarly well qualified to interpret East to West and West to East, owing to the variety of his attainments and the width of his sympathies . . . His translation of this work having stopped at Section 24 [out of 29], at his widow's request I translated the four remaining sections.⁴⁶

This was in 1937, when Margoliouth was in his late seventies and had only recently been widowed himself. Quite apart from shock and grief, the task was nightmarish, for half a dozen reasons. Firstly, in his original German text, Mez had varied the forms of Arabic names and titles and quoted sources with the gay insouciance typical of some scholars of the period, not saying what editions he was using, and concealing the identities and whereabouts of manuscripts. Secondly, the printer of the English version made an alphabet soup of the Arabic names and titles, reducing some phrases to gibberish.⁴⁷ Thirdly, Margoliouth felt that Mez had sometimes got things wrong, in his translations of poetry, for example. And lastly, Khuda Bakhsh sometimes took issue with Mez on matters of religious belief or practice, and added substantial remarks to this effect. Unpicking and tidying all this up would have been impossible, so Margoliouth simply did his best, for which generations of readers have been grateful: for many years, *The Renaissance of Islam* was quoted as *the* authority on medieval Islamic social history.

From all this, I think it is clear that Margoliouth was dedicated to being useful to Arabic scholarship and fellow-scholars, and, through contributing to the journal *Islamic Culture* almost from its foundation in 1927, that he wanted to be of use too in 'interpreting East to West and West to East', as he himself put it. (*Islamic Culture* was conceived as a forum for scholars of Islam from both India and Europe; Margoliouth was one of its principal western contributors.)⁴⁸ His usefulness was long-lasting, not just through his published work, but through the students that he trained. Thanks to his interest in the precursors of Classical Arabic, he was of use to his student A. F. L. Beeston, whose passion was Ancient South Arabian, and who himself trained the next generations of leading scholars in that field.⁴⁹ Beeston also made crucial contributions to Arabic linguistics and to the appreciation of the elegance, wit and humanity of Classical Arabic literature;

⁴⁴ Adam Mez, trans. Salahuddin Khuda Bakhsh and D. S. Margoliouth, *The Renaissance of Islam* (London: Luzac & Co./Patna: Jubilee Printing & Publishing House, 1937), Introductory Note, p. ii.

⁴⁵ Edited by H. Reckendorf (Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1922).

⁴⁶ Mez, *The Renaissance*, pp. xx, xxiii.

⁴⁷ Introduction to the 2024 reprint of *The Renaissance* reissued in reproduction by I. B. Tauris (London, 2024), as *The Renaissance of Islam: History, Culture and Society in the 10th Century Muslim World*, with an introduction and bibliography by Julia Bray, p. viii.

⁴⁸ The periodical *Islamic Culture: The Hyderabad Quarterly Review* was among the numerous educational initiatives financed by the last Nizam of Hyderabad. Founded in 1927, it was edited by Marmaduke Pickthall (1875–1936), an English convert to Islam who was famous in his day as a popular novelist and for his 1930 translation of the Qur'an, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*. The periodical's aims are described by F. Krenkow, subsequently a contributor, in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 60 (1928), 192.

⁴⁹ See the obituary of A. F. L. Beeston by Edward Ullendorff, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 94 (1997), 295–316, at p. 299.

in these areas too, his ‘attachment to, and admiration for, Margoliouth was profound’,⁵⁰ and by example he passed on Margoliouth’s love of translation to his own students. Last and perhaps most importantly of all, Margoliouth laid down a teaching ethic which has marked his successors. After his tenure of the Laudian chair, there was no slipping back into the old ways.⁵¹

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⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ Margoliouth was also an active and prompt reviewer, particularly of monographs and scholarly text editions published in the Middle East. In the April issue alone of the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* for 1909, he reviewed eight publications, including the Cairo edition of a ninth-century anthology of women’s wit and wisdom, Jurjī Zaydān’s *The Arabs before Islam*, two works by the Egyptian reformist Shaykh Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī (1862–1940), and a Syrian survey of ‘the state of the Ottoman Empire before and after the Constitution [of 1876]’, all but one within a year of their publication. He continued reviewing until the end of his life: the *JRAS* for April 1938 also has a wide spread of reviews by ‘DSM’. Many of these books, with Margoliouth’s stamp and annotations—especially valuable for his Arabic notes on classical texts—are now in the Bodleian Libraries.