

D. S. Margoliouth: An Orientalist of his Time and Ahead of his Time



Portrait of D. S. Margoliouth, Photograph Album of Fellows (1887)
New College Archives, Oxford, NCA 11716, p. 8 © Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of New College, Oxford

David Samuel Margoliouth (1850–1940) was the most prominent Arabist and Islamicist in Britain during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In the words of Gilbert Murray, Regius Professor of Greek at Christ Church (and Margoliouth’s friend and neighbour on Boars Hill), ‘No scholar of our generation has left so deep and permanent mark on Oriental studies’ as he did.¹

Margoliouth’s scholarly prowess showed in many ways, above all, his talent for ancient and medieval languages. In addition to Arabic, he mastered Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Syriac, Sabaic,

¹ Gilbert Murray, ‘David Samuel Margoliouth 1858–1940’, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 26 (1940), 389–97, at p. 397. The present article draws on this and the following obituaries and profiles of Margoliouth: 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; Arthur Jefferey, ‘David Samuel Margoliouth’, *The Muslim World* 30 (1940), 295–8; 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: 15 July 2026); Jabal Muhammad Buaben, *Image of the Prophet Muhammad in the West: A Study of Muir, Margoliouth and Watt* (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1996), pp. 49–128, 311–17; Naide Gedikli Goralı, Jessica Rahardjo, and Christopher Skelton–Foord, ‘[MS 383 and Margoliouth: To Mark the Return of Arabic to New College, Oxford](#)’, *New College Notes* 22 (2024), no. 6.

Turkish, Persian, Armenian, and Sanskrit. He wrote across an unusually broad range of subjects, publishing editions and translations of important Arabic texts, some of which remain authoritative today.² He also produced works of generational significance on the life of the Prophet Muḥammad, the development of early Islamic thought, and Classical Arabic literature.³ Some of these works were composed for popular audiences, reflecting Margoliouth's reach well beyond the cloisters of Oxford.

Not all of Margoliouth's books have aged well, as is to be expected of a scholar who lived over a hundred years ago. But some still stand up to scrutiny. These books are marked by a deep engagement with primary sources, and a capacity for lucid, creative summary. A number of his works foreshadow major turns in the field that occurred decades after his death, especially the historical–critical approach to early Islamic sources that blossomed starting in the 1970s. For this reason, it seems appropriate to entitle the present article, 'D. S. Margoliouth: An Orientalist of his Time and Ahead of his Time'.

The main purpose of this essay is to provide an overview of Margoliouth's life, particularly his connection with New College. His association with the college lasted for 50 years, from the time he came up as an undergraduate in 1877 until his retirement as the Laudian Professor of Arabic in 1937. Put simply, New College shaped his life more profoundly than any other institution with the possible exception of the Church of England, of which he was an ordained minister.

EARLY LIFE

Margoliouth was born in 1858 in London to Ezekiel and Sarah Margoliouth, Polish Jews who had emigrated to Britain and converted to Anglicanism. His father may have been a rabbi before converting to Christianity or was the son of a rabbi. Ezekiel was later ordained a priest and worked as a missionary among the Jews of Bethnal Green in east London. His was not the only prominent branch of the Margoliouth family. Indeed, a separate branch produced Moses Margoliouth (1815–1881)—likewise a Polish émigré, Anglican convert, and missionary—who spent time as a vicar in Ireland and England before publishing a three-volume *History of the Jews in Great Britain* in 1851.⁴ Moses's nephew was George Margoliouth (1853–1924)—a contemporary of D. S. Margoliouth—who converted to Christianity while a university student in Germany, later becoming the keeper of Hebrew, Syriac and Ethiopic manuscripts at the British Museum.⁵

The Margoliouth family was thus characterized by an unusual mixture of religions, cultures, and languages, at least by the standards of Victorian England. One suspects this background partly explains the decision of D. S. and George Margoliouth to pursue oriental studies as an academic vocation. To use the modern lingo, they were 'cultural brokers' with a foot in multiple worlds. As a result, they possessed a unique capacity to explore and explain the civilizations of the premodern Near East to nineteenth and early twentieth century audiences.

Over the years, D. S. Margoliouth's critics have argued that his ancestral Judaism coloured his views of Islam. As Jabal Muhammad Buaben put it (indulging in some questionable psychoanalysis), 'Even though both his father and uncle converted to Christianity, and he himself

² Yāqūt ibn 'Abdallāh al-Ḥamawī, *The Irshād al-arīb ilā ma'rifat al-adīb: or Dictionary of Learned Men of Yāqūt*, ed. D. S. Margoliouth, 7 vols. (London: Luzac & Co., 1907–27; al-Muḥassin ibn 'Alī al-Tanūkhī, *The Table-Talk of a Mesopotamian Judge: Being the First Part of the Nishwār al-muḥāḍarah, or Jāmi' al-tawārīkh of Abu 'Alī al-Muḥassin al-Tanūkhī*, ed. and trans. D. S. Margoliouth, 2 vols. (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1921–2).

³ e.g., D. S. Margoliouth, *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1905); idem, *Mohammedanism* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1911); idem, *Lectures on Arabic Historians: Delivered before the University of Calcutta, February 1929* (Calcutta: The University of Calcutta, 1930).

⁴ David S. Katz, 'Margoliouth, Moses (1815–1881)', *ODNB* (23 September 2004) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/18055>> (Accessed: 15 July 2026); Moses Margoliouth, *The History of the Jews in Great Britain*, 3 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, 1851).

⁵ Among his noteworthy publications, see G. Margoliouth, *Descriptive List of the Hebrew and Samaritan MSS. in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1893).

grew up a Christian, his natural Jewish attachment and sympathies remained'.⁶ I find it hard to believe that Margoliouth harboured crypto-Jewish beliefs which somehow negatively influenced his scholarship on Islam; but I do think it is possible, indeed likely, that his family's complex religious background drew him into the discipline and a lifetime of research on the Abrahamic religions.

After initial schooling in London, Margoliouth won a scholarship to Winchester in 1872, distinguishing himself with prizes in Classics, religion, modern languages, and English.⁷ His former pupil and successor as the Laudian professor of Arabic, Freddie Beeston (1911–1995), traced his 'curious air of withdrawn detachment and introspection that clung to him even in his later years' to this time at Winchester. '[A]s an academically highly gifted boy of Jewish parentage and coming from an east London day school [Margoliouth] must have surely—at least intermittently—suffered rough treatment from his schoolfellows', Beeston speculated.⁸

Whatever the case may be, Margoliouth's status as an outsider did not hinder his academic ascent. In 1877, he went up to New College to read Literae Humaniores. Again, he excelled in his studies, winning prizes in Greek, Hebrew, Syriac, and Sanskrit. Soon after in 1881, he was elected a fellow of the college in recognition of his prodigious abilities. During his early years as a fellow, Margoliouth was mainly a tutor for Lit Hum, though he also looked after students reading for degrees in geology, theology, law, history, and very rarely, Oriental Studies.⁹ A photo from this period survives in the New College Archives, showing Margoliouth in the fullness of his youth, surrounded by a group of his tutees.¹⁰ He was very handsome, in the words of Gilbert Murray, possessing an 'exotic and vivid appearance—*Questo bel animale feroce*, as an Italian lady [reportedly once] described him'.¹¹ His good looks were matched by flashes of wit. None other than Gertrude Bell (1868–1926)—the great traveller, archaeologist, and British agent in the Middle East, who met Margoliouth while he was lecturing in Baghdad—remarked that 'he has got a most delicious edge, besides all his learning'.¹²

In 1889, Margoliouth was elected the Laudian professor of Arabic, one of the oldest Arabic chairs in Europe, established in 1636. He would hold the chair for longer than any other occupant save the first, the great Edward Pococke (1636–91).¹³ Despite his promotion to professor, Margoliouth remained at New College, shedding his duties as a tutorial fellow but assuming the role of college librarian.¹⁴ It was not until 1937 and the appointment of Margoliouth's successor, Sir Hamilton Gibb, that the Laudian chair came to rest at St John's, where it remains today.

By all accounts, it was a surprise that Margoliouth became the Laudian professor at all. He succeeded on his second attempt, having applied once before in 1887. According to Beeston, 'The dossier of recommendations that he submitted contained not a single allusion to any knowledge of Arabic'.¹⁵ As Murray wrote about the episode, 'It was, not, I think that he specially admired or loved Arabic literature. He preferred Greek, though doubtless the survival of Arabic as a spoken language and the vast range of problems which it opened up added to its attractiveness'.¹⁶

⁶ Buaben, *Image of the Prophet Muhammad*, p. 91.

⁷ On Margoliouth's time at Winchester, see Tim Giddings, 'Eminent Victorians of Win Coll: Four Linguists', *The Trusty Servant* 129 (May 2020), 15–17.

⁸ Beeston, 'Margoliouth', ODNB.

⁹ New College Archives, Oxford, NCA TUI/S1/2.

¹⁰ Photograph of D. S. Margoliouth and five others at New College in 1886, NCA 11342.

¹¹ Murray, 'Margoliouth', 389.

¹² Letter from Gertrude Bell to her stepmother Dame Florence Bell (3 January 1919), Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University Library Special Collections, GB/1/1/1/1/28/1: <<https://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/1/gb-1-1-1-1-28-1>> (Accessed: 15 July 2026).

¹³ G. J. Toomer, 'Pococke, Edward (1604–1691)', ODNB (3 January 2008) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/22430>> (Accessed: 15 July 2026).

¹⁴ *Oxford University Calendar*, passim.

¹⁵ Beeston, 'Margoliouth', ODNB.

¹⁶ Murray, 'Margoliouth', 390.

Despite his lack of formal credentials, Margoliouth excelled in the job. For much of his career, he served as the sole Arabic instructor for the entire university, occasionally assisted by an Arabic lector. There were admittedly not many students—perhaps one or two finalists each year. But Margoliouth had to cover everything from elementary grammar and composition (he asked his pupils to translate articles from the front page of *The Times*) to history, literature, and religion.¹⁷ He also proved himself by publishing a number of innovative books in the field. His earliest was an edition and study of Aristotle's *Poetics* in Arabic from 1887, which displayed his deep knowledge of classical as well as oriental languages.¹⁸ A catalogue of Arabic papyri in the Bodleian Library followed in 1893, as well as an edition and translation of the letters of al-Ma'arrī (*d.* 1057), the free-thinking Syrian poet, in 1898.¹⁹

MARRIAGE AND RELIGIOUS LIFE

In 1896, at the age of 37, Margoliouth married Jessie Payne Smith (1856–1933); they had no children.²⁰ An accomplished orientalist in her own right, Jessie was the daughter of Robert Payne Smith (1818–1895), dean of Canterbury Cathedral and author of what remains today the most important lexicon of the Syriac language.²¹ During their married life, Professor and Mrs Margoliouth lived in two houses in Oxford: the first at 88 Woodstock Road (catty-corner from the childhood home of T. E. Lawrence (1888–1935), whom, one is tempted to imagine, Margoliouth knew as a boy); and later at Romney on Boars Hill. Margoliouth delighted in driving a large, antiquated car—which he proudly maintained himself—into the city centre each day.²² (David Taylor's article in this issue of *New College Notes* provides ample information about Jessie and her relationship with D. S. Margoliouth).²³

Margoliouth was a devoted Christian. He belonged to the evangelical wing of the Anglican Church, and was associated with the parishes of St Aldates and St Andrews. In 1899, Margoliouth was ordained to the priesthood, though he was never assigned to a specific parish.²⁴ The New College Archives preserve a moving sermon he delivered in the college chapel in May 1920 entitled 'The Sword of the Spirit', in which he reflected on the theme of Christian heroism; the sermon gives a flavour of his religious worldview. 'The Christian religion has no beatitudes for victory, success, and what they bring', he said, 'The true test of heroism is therefore neither the personal distinction of [the Book of] Ecclesiasticus nor the magnificent performance of the Book of Wisdom, but as the Epistle to the Hebrews has it, faith'.²⁵

As we have seen, at least one of Margoliouth's critics alleged that he was a crypto-Jew, and that his convictions influenced his negative portrayal of Islam. Other critics accused him of being

¹⁷ Beeston, 'Margoliouth', *ODNB*. I have not been able to identify this Arabic lector, but it would be interesting to know more of his (or their) background.

¹⁸ *Analecta Orientalia ad Poeticam Aristotelem*, ed. D. Margoliouth (London: D. Nutt, 1887).

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

²⁰ D. G. K. Taylor, 'Margoliouth [*née* Smith], Jessie Payne (1856–1933)', *ODNB* (12 November 2020) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/58372>> (Accessed: 15 July 2026).

²¹ R. S. Simpson, 'Smith, Robert Payne (1818–1895)', *ODNB* (26 May 2005) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/21660>> (Accessed: 15 July 2026).

²² Beeston, 'Margoliouth', *ODNB*; Murray, 'Margoliouth', 395.

²³ David G. K. Taylor, 'Mrs Margoliouth: Jessie Payne Smith, Syriac Scholar and Suffragist', *New College Notes* 25 (2026), no. 6.

²⁴ Beeston, 'Margoliouth', *ODNB*. I have not addressed Margoliouth's works in biblical studies—'very conservative . . . and somewhat unduly suspicious of critical work on the Old Testament', in the words of Arthur Jefferey ('Margoliouth', 296; cf. Murray, 'Margoliouth', 392)—but they clearly reflected his personal convictions about religion. See esp. D. S. Margoliouth, *Lines of Defence of the Biblical Revelation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1900).

²⁵ D. S. Margoliouth, *The Sword of the Spirit: A Sermon preached before the University of Oxford on Trinity Sunday, May 30th, 1920, in the Chapel of New College*. Printed by request and for Private Circulation (Oxford: Fox, Jones & Co., 1920), New College Archives, Oxford, NCA PA/JOS/17/1.

a Christian apologist. As one contemporary reviewer put it, ‘There is an insidious undercurrent running throughout [his work on the Prophet Muḥammad], and the virus is skilfully mixed in every page’.²⁶ Margoliouth’s successor as the Laudian professor of Arabic, Sir Hamilton Gibb, shared this concern, noting that Margoliouth’s ‘observations disturbed many of his European and sometimes infuriated his Muslim readers’.²⁷

Interestingly, Margoliouth did not see himself as a Christian apologist when it came to his writings on Islam. Of course, if were alive today, he might be accused of ‘unconscious bias’. But it is noteworthy that in the introduction to his earliest book on the Prophet, *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam* (1905), he distanced himself from an earlier generation of orientalists who wrote critical accounts of the Prophet’s life, often incorporating Christian polemics. His most prominent foil was William Muir (1819–1905), the Scottish scholar of Islam and colonial administrator who penned a famous biography of Muḥammad in 1858–61 that was widely read in the English-speaking world. Margoliouth critiqued this work for its ‘confessedly Christian bias’. By contrast, he said that his goal was to write neither ‘an apology nor an indictment’, but a profile of ‘a great man, who solved a political problem of appalling difficulty,—the construction of a state and an empire out of the Arab tribes’.²⁸ It is safe to say that Margoliouth sometimes wrote in an ironic, combative tone that a scholar of Islam (or any other subject) would probably avoid today. But in contrast to the benchmark of earlier Christian orientalists, Margoliouth produced works of superior rigour and objectivity.

BEYOND OXFORD

During his years as the Laudian professor, Margoliouth’s intellectual networks reached well beyond Oxford. He belonged to a golden generation of European orientalists whose works still form the backbone of Islamic studies in the west. For example, he frequently cited older contemporaries such as the Germans Theodor Nöldeke (1836–1930) and Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), as well as the Hungarian Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921).²⁹ Like Margoliouth, these men were polyglots who pioneered critical approaches to Islamic sources such as the Qur’an, *ḥadīth*, and early Arabic historiography. M. J. de Goeje (1836–1909)—professor of Arabic in Leiden, whose edition of al-Ṭabarī’s *History* remains the gold standard still today—corresponded with Margoliouth and sent him manuscripts from Leiden to Oxford to aid his work on al-Ma‘arrī.³⁰

Margoliouth’s career was also marked by robust engagement with writers, intellectuals, and traditionally trained scholars from Muslim-majority countries. Not only were his works widely disseminated in the Arab and Muslim worlds, but he also travelled widely. These included extended stays in Egypt, Iraq, and India, where he spent much of World War I lecturing, accompanied by his wife.³¹ We can catch a glimpse of these networks in the dedications he included at the start of his books: *Cairo, Jerusalem & Damascus* (1907) was dedicated to Princess Nāzī Fāḍil (1853–1913), a member of the Muḥammad ‘Alī Pāshā dynasty, who presided over a famous literary salon in her Cairo palace;³² *Lectures on Arabic Historians* (1929) was dedicated to Sir Khuda Bakhsh (1842–1908),

²⁶ Eliot Howard, cited in Buaben, *Image of the Prophet Muḥammad*, p. 110.

²⁷ Gibb, ‘Margoliouth’, 393.

²⁸ Margoliouth, *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam*, pp. iv, vi–vii; cf. William Muir, *The Life of Mohamet and History of Islam, To the Era of the Hegira*, 4 vols. (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1858–61); Buaben, *Image of the Prophet Muḥammad*, pp. 21–47.

²⁹ e.g., Margoliouth, *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam*, p. iv.

³⁰ Margoliouth, *Letters of Abu ‘l-‘Alā of Ma‘arrat al-Nu‘mān*, pp. v–vi.

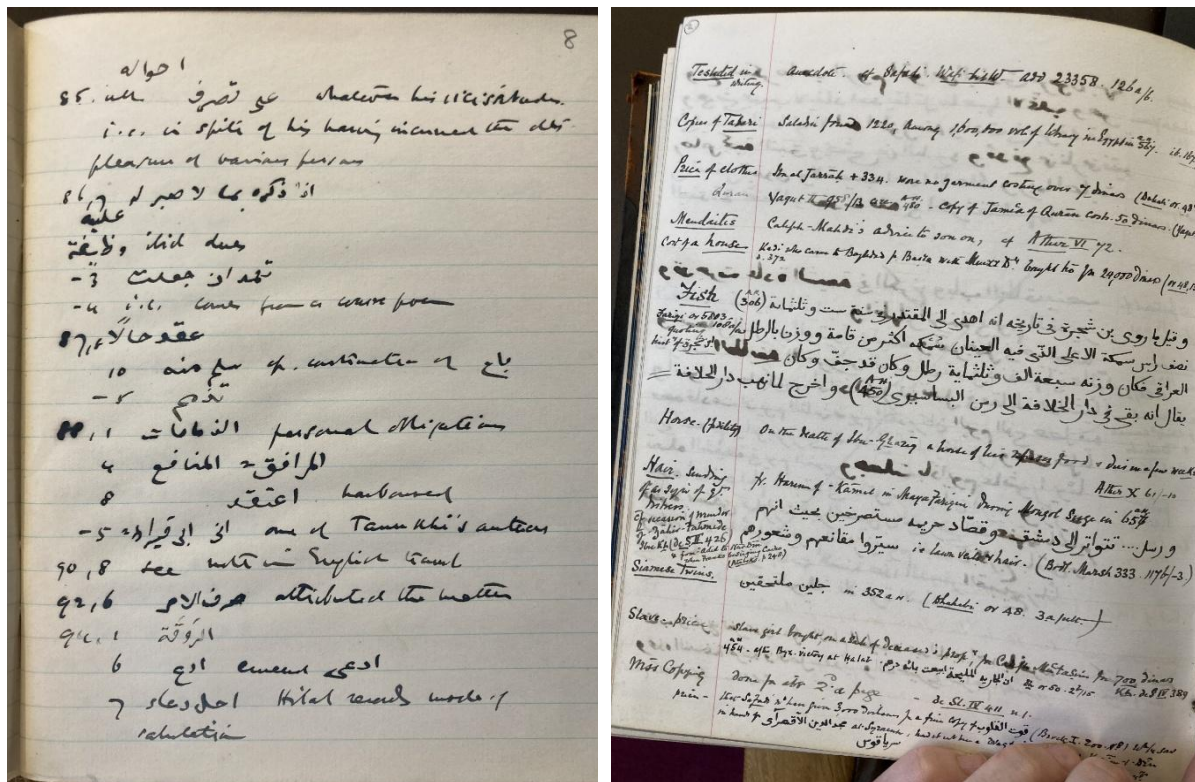
³¹ Beeston, ‘Margoliouth’, ODNB; Gibb, ‘Margoliouth’, 394; Jefferey, ‘Margoliouth’, 297; cf. Taylor, ‘Margoliouth [née Smith]’, ODNB.

³² D. S. Margoliouth, *Cairo, Jerusalem & Damascus: Three Chief Cities of the Egyptian Sultans* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907).

an Indian judge and scholar whom Margoliouth described as an 'interpreter of Indian Islam to Europe and of European Orientalism to India'.³³

Another important interlocutor was Jurji Zaydan (1861–1914), the Lebanese Christian novelist, journalist, and editor, who was a prominent figure in the Arab literary awakening known as the *Nahḍa*. Significantly, in 1907, Margoliouth translated part of Zaydan's *History of Islamic Civilization* which focused on the Umayyad and 'Abbasid periods. In the Middle East, Zaydan's work stirred considerable controversy: it was a nakedly secular history of Islam—touching on sensitive subjects such as the racial chauvinism of the Arab conquerors, the discrimination faced by non-Arab converts and non-Muslims, and the tyranny of the early caliphs. The work was also considered inflammatory because its author, Zaydan, was a Christian. The fact that Margoliouth translated the work into English indicates his awareness of important debates in the Middle East and his role as a mediator of knowledge between Europe and the Arab world.³⁴

Margoliouth thus complicates the one-dimensional picture that sometimes emerges from polemical writings against the orientalists. He was not an apologist for Islam. But by the same token, he revelled in his academic and personal friendships with Muslims and Arabs. In some respects, he seems to have been better connected with intellectual circles in the Middle East than many scholars in the field are today.



Research notes of D. S. Margoliouth (1880s), Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS. Or. Margoliouth 10
© The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford

Much of what I have said so far summarizes obituaries of Margoliouth written by his friends and contemporaries. But I have also drawn on the treasure-trove of information about Margoliouth contained in the Bodleian Library, which still awaits careful study. There are 46 boxes of papers from D. S. and Jessie Margoliouth, containing hundreds of diaries, notebooks, calendars,

³³ Margoliouth, *Lectures on Arabic Historians*.

³⁴ *Umayyads and 'Abbāsids: Being the Fourth Part of Jurji Zaydan's History of Islamic Civilization*, trans. D. S. Margoliouth (Leyden: E. J. Brill/London: Luzac & Co., 1907).

shopping lists, letters, draft publications, and other materials.³⁵ The New College Archives contain a more modest cache, including photographs, correspondence, and even the menu and placement from Margoliouth's retirement dinner in 1938.³⁶

Margoliouth's diaries tend to be laconic, dry, and often illegible. Interestingly, he sometimes wrote in Arabic, a practice that was not uncommon among other orientalists of his generation (E. G. Browne (1862–1926) of Cambridge apparently did the same in Persian.) It is unclear why he switched between the two languages. On the one hand, Margoliouth is known to have lectured in Arabic while in the Middle East, so it is not very surprising that he also used it for writing from time to time. According to Gilbert Murray, Margoliouth, usually 'somewhat silent in English', 'became full of conversation when addressed in Arabic or Turkish'.³⁷ On the other hand, I suspect Margoliouth sometimes used Arabic to write about sensitive subjects. A good example comes from a diary entry from 18 August 1933—the day Jessie died. Margoliouth writes that he needed to obtain a certificate for her *hariq*, or cremation, choosing the Arabic word instead of the English. Perhaps the horror of the day explains why he wrote this word discreetly in Arabic; perhaps cremation—permitted under British law only in 1902 and not yet fully mainstream among conservative evangelicals in the 1930s—may explain the choice.³⁸

A FORWARD THINKER

I would like to conclude by briefly discussing the manner in which Margoliouth's publications could be ahead of their time. This is most evident in his work on the life of the Prophet, which foreshadows academic debates in the coming decades, especially the historical-critical turn associated with John Wansbrough, Patricia Crone, Michael Cook, and others during the 1970s.³⁹ The basic claim of this school was that the Islamic historical tradition is late, tendentious, and unreliable, and that the Islam of the seventh century was considerably different from how later historians, theologians, and ideologues imagined had been. Margoliouth agreed with this critique in broad stroke long before it was ever articulated. It finds echoes in his approach to pre-Islamic poetry, which he believed was fabricated by later Muslim authors, an interesting debate which I do not have scope to discuss here.⁴⁰

Margoliouth's entry on Muḥammad in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (1916) sums up his views. In this work, he refers to the existence of non-Muslim sources from the seventh century containing precious information about the rise of Islam but from an outsider perspective. Such sources would later form the backbone of *Hagarism* (1977), Crone and Cook's provocative and iconoclastic retelling of Islamic origins, written on the basis of contemporary Christian and

³⁵ In 2006, the Bodleian Library produced a handlist of the contents of these papers: 'Bodleian Library: Department of Oriental Collections. D. S. Margoliouth papers. MSS Or. Margoliouth. Including the papers of Robert Payne-Smith and Jessie Payne-Smith/Margoliouth'. I am grateful to Sam Sales in the Weston Library Special Collections for directing me to this document.

³⁶ I am grateful to Michael Stansfield, archivist & records manager of New College, for directing me to these papers and answering various queries. For the menu and placement (Complimentary Dinner to Dr D. S. Margoliouth dinner menu, toasts, and seating plan, 12 January 1938), see NCA BCF/154.

³⁷ Letter from Gertrude Bell to Florence Bell (3 January 1919), Newcastle University Library Special Collections; Murray, 'Margoliouth', 390.

³⁸ Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS. Or. Margoliouth 7, Diary of D. S. Margoliouth from 1933 (18 August 1933). Jessie's funeral took place at St Andrew's Church in North Oxford.

³⁹ Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); idem, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

⁴⁰ D. S. Margoliouth, 'The Origins of Arabic Poetry', *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 57 (1925), 417–49. Margoliouth advanced a very similar argument as the Egyptian writer and intellectual Taha Hussein (1889–1973) in his famous and controversial book *Fi 'l-shi'r al-jāhili* (Cairo: Maṭba' at Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1926). The connection between these two studies, published one year apart from one another, has not been worked out satisfactorily in my view.

Jewish eyewitnesses. These sources were little known when Crone and Cook rediscovered them in the 1970s; they were even less well known when Margoliouth wrote about them in the 1910s.⁴¹

In his entry, Margoliouth shows a strong scepticism towards the early biographical sources about the Prophet—referred to as *Sīra* literature in Arabic—much in the way that later scholars would do. For example, he makes the simple but profound observation that the earliest surviving recension of the *Sīra* was written long after the Prophet died. To understand the text, Margoliouth argues, one must first grasp the political and sectarian milieu in which it was written. In the case of the Prophet's most famous biographer, Ibn Ishāq (*d.* 767), Margoliouth notes that he wrote his *Sīra* on behalf of a very powerful, very biased patron, the 'Abbasid caliph al-Manṣūr. He also notes that Ibn Ishāq's *Sīra* survives only in the heavily edited recension of Ibn Hishām (*d.* 833), a scholar from two generations later. For Margoliouth, these were reasons to distrust—or at least, critically reassess—the basic claims of the Islamic tradition.⁴²

Margoliouth also emphasized the overlaps between late antique Jewish and Christian literature, on the one hand, and the Qur'an and the *Sīra*, on the other. Specifically, he argued that the social context for these overlaps was the rise of Christian missionary movements across pre-Islamic Arabia.⁴³ Today, it is widely accepted that monotheism was on the rise in Arabia before the seventh century, so much so that some believe that polytheism was in retreat when the Prophet embarked on his mission.⁴⁴ But this is not the traditional view of Islamic historical sources nor of earlier generations of orientalists, who believed that Muḥammad emerged within a largely pagan milieu. Margoliouth saw things differently, in a way, anticipating the argument of Peter Brown (another product of New College, who read history between 1953 and 1956) that Arabia was very much part of a wider late antique world, and this influenced the literary sensibilities of early Islamic texts.⁴⁵

A final interesting feature of Margoliouth's writing on the Prophet was his reliance on anthropological models of new religious movements. Specifically, he compared the early Muslims and the early Mormons (a prominent theme of his 1905 book on Muḥammad).⁴⁶ Margoliouth was not the first orientalist to identify similarities between the two religions, as reflected in the phenomena of continuous prophecy, supersessionism, *hijra* (emigration from an abode of unbelief to an abode of righteousness), militancy, etc. Margoliouth's staunchest critic in recent years, Jabal Muhammad Buaben, argued that the comparison had its roots in Margoliouth's apologetic agenda,

⁴¹ D. S. Margoliouth, 'Muhammad', in *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics: Volume VIII*, ed. James Hastings with John A. Selbie and Louis H. Gray, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1915), pp. 871–80, esp. p. 872; cf. idem, *Mohammedanism*, pp. 42–74. Margoliouth touches on one of the most famous of the non-Islamic sources for the seventh century, the Armenian *Chronicle of Pseudo-Sebeos*. For a recent English translation of the relevant passage, see Stephen J. Shoemaker, *A Prophet Has Appeared: The Rise of Islam through Christian and Jewish Eyes: A Sourcebook* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021), pp. 62–72.

⁴² Margoliouth, 'Muhammad', 872–83; cf. idem, *The Early Development of Mohammedanism: Lectures Delivered in the University of London, May and June 1913* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1914), pp. 230–58.

⁴³ Margoliouth, 'Muhammad', 873–74; cf. idem, *Mohammed*, esp. pp. 42–4.

⁴⁴ For an overview, see Christian Julien Robin, 'Arabia and Ethiopia', in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 247–332; Gabriel Said Reynolds, *Christianity and the Qur'an: The Rise of Islam in Christian Arabia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2025). Patricia Crone went so far as to argue that the famous *mushrikūn* of the Qur'an—pagans, literally 'those associate' God with created beings and things—were in fact wayward monotheists: 'The Religion of the Qur'ānic Pagans: God and the Lesser Deities', *Arabica* 57 (2010), 151–200.

⁴⁵ Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150–750* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), pp. 189–203.

⁴⁶ Margoliouth, *Mohammed*, pp. vii–viii, 90–92, etc. Margoliouth cited the following as having been influential in his study of Mormonism: I. Woodbridge Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism: A Psychological Study of Joseph Smith, Jr.* (London: William Heinemann, 1903). The comparison between early Islam and Mormonism has enduring appeal among Islamicists; for a recent example, see Robert G. Hoyland, *In God's Path: The Arab Conquest and the Creation of an Islamic Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 277 n. 33. Generally, see Arnold H. Green, 'The Muhammad-Joseph Smith Comparison: Subjective Metaphor or a Sociology of Prophethood', in *Mormons and Muslims: Spiritual Foundations and Modern Manifestations*, ed. Spencer J. Palmer (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1983), pp. 63–84.

which may be true in part.⁴⁷ Personally, I take a more sanguine view of the comparison: Margoliouth, exceptionally for his time, was interested in phenomenological approaches to the history of Islam and in identifying similar patterns in radically different cultural contexts. He believed that 19th-century America could provide models for understanding what was happening in the far murkier, more poorly documented world of seventh-century Arabia.

Interestingly, despite his scepticism, Margoliouth believed that the early *Sīra* literature was basically trustworthy—a major point of difference between him and his successors. He offered various arguments for this, the broadest being that the picture of the Prophet that emerges from early *Sīra* literature was, in his judgement, often unflattering. He is presented as a man who coveted power, who could be fickle, and who was captive to very human passions. This ‘repulsive’ image, as Margoliouth bluntly put it, meant that it could not have been whitewashed by later ideologues and hagiographers and therefore, it must be true.⁴⁸

To conclude: Margoliouth came from an exceptionally interesting background; he was blessed with exceptional intellectual gifts; and he used these gifts to produce scholarship that was sometimes exceptionally ahead of his time. We are fortunate to have him as our ‘patron saint’ as we revive the study of Arabic at New College.

Christian C. Sahner
Margoliouth Fellow in Arabic, New College, Oxford
Associate Professor of Islamic History, Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Oxford

⁴⁷ Buaben, *Image of the Prophet Muḥammad*, pp. 106–8.

⁴⁸ Margoliouth, ‘Muhammad’, 872–3.