

D. S. Margoliouth's Biblical, Homeric, and Islamic Studies

Margoliouth was a member of New College for 63 years, a span to which I have to defer, having been there as a fellow for only 49.¹ I hesitate to pass personal comments on someone whom I never knew, and I will not sink to the false intimacy of some modern biographers who refer to their subjects by their first name only. He will remain 'Margoliouth' in what follows, but I welcome this invitation to reflect on him and his very wide range of work. His translations of Arabic prose texts from the 10th and 11th centuries CE proved invaluable to me in 1976–7 when I was holding a research fellowship in Islamic history at Worcester College, so much so that I cited them in my interview for the Ancient History fellowship in New College in early 1977. To a largely baffled board of assessors in the Panelled Room I explained that it would be a particular honour to come to New College and be close to the texts and legacy of Margoliouth, whose work was already proving very helpful to me. The compliment was received in bemused silence by most of the committee: they had evidently never heard of him. One member, however, struck the table and uttered, characteristically, 'Pah!': he was the great Tony Andrewes, Wykeham professor of Greek history who had indeed known Margoliouth, a much older fellow-Wykehamist. I had no idea that the college library had only a few texts by Margoliouth, but it is fair to add that at the time it did not have a copy of *War and Peace* either.

In the *New College Notes* for December 2024, the librarian has written a concise account of Margoliouth's youth, religious connections, schooling, and achievements as a pupil.² I wish merely to emphasise how remarkable those achievements were. At Oxford he won both the Hertford and the Ireland scholarships in his first year as an undergraduate, the pinnacles in Oxford's mountain chain of invigilated examinations in Greek and Latin. Among their requirements were unseen translations from Greek and Latin into English and the rendering, also in a prescribed length of time, of set pieces of English prose and verse into Greek and Latin prose and verse. Margoliouth then went on to win not only three University prizes in Hebrew, a language he had known since childhood, but also the prizes in Syriac (1880) and Sanskrit (1881); I do not think these remarkable achievements have ever been matched.

I have read through his lengthy winning entry for the Gaisford Greek prose prize of 1879. It is an extended essay in ancient Greek whose title, given in Latin, translates as 'Change in the Constitution of the Japanese'. In it, he dilates in Greek on the offices and regulations that followed the haphazard world of the Shoguns. His Greek flows on smoothly and faultlessly but it lacks the brilliant wit and insight of two subsequent maestros of composition, Eton College's Ronald Knox and Geoffrey Madan. Contemporaries credit Margoliouth with a sense of humour, but one, it seems, which was rather cryptic and heavy with irony. The fine classicist Gilbert Murray, for many years his colleague in New College SCR, recalls how Margoliouth's wife once disturbed him in order to read him an 'irresistibly funny' passage by P. G. Wodehouse, but after she did so, Margoliouth merely replied that 'he could well believe that, if it were well acted, one would see that the author's intention was humorous'.³ He was, after all, a Wykehamist, educationally straitjacketed to be earnest and in general, cold.

In later life, he looked back on some of his classical composing as a waste of time. A. F. L. Beeston, a Laudian professor of Arabic long after Margoliouth, wrote how a particular pupil, evidently himself, was reproached by Margoliouth when he rendered into metrical Arabic an English verse-quotation in a leading article of the *Times* newspaper, whose contents Margoliouth

¹ This article owes its existence as a published text to the patient brilliance of Caroline Vigna. I thank Christian C. Sahner for his invitation to speak on this subject. I myself, an atheist, was the college's previous tutor for Oriental Studies, following Dr Saul Rose, born a Jew. A Catholic who is committed to Catholic ethics is an apt holder of a fellowship named after Margoliouth, an evangelical Christian, as this study explores.

² 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.

³ Gilbert Murray, 'David Samuel Margoliouth 1858–1940', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 26 (1940), 389–97, at p. 396.

had told him to turn into Arabic prose. All Margoliouth said to him was, 'I sometimes think that the time in my life I consider most wasted is the time I spent composing Latin verses at Winchester'.⁴ I emphasise that the reference here is to Latin verses, not Greek. The dexterity with ancient Greek which composition in it encourages remained an important underpinning for the most extraordinary of Margoliouth's many publications.

Margoliouth might be inspiring, recalls Beeston, 'but he was not encouraging'. He belonged, therefore, in a long Oxford tradition. In 1882 he became a fellow of New College, and I have found he was responsible in 1886 for 20 to 30 classical pupils each term, much as I was in 1977–91 when as a tutorial fellow I was required to teach for Exeter College too. Some of Margoliouth's many pupils were extremely able. A black-and-white photograph shows him wearing a dark suit with a watch chain in his waistcoat and finely polished shoes, his head capped by a mortar board, as he stands in the entrance to a college staircase with five young men who are wearing or holding bowler hats. One of them, Baden Powell, was reading law, but three of the others were full classicists, including a young Wykehamist, F. J. K. Cross, also a prodigy and subsequently appointed to be a classical fellow of the college directly after graduation like Margoliouth himself. Teaching and imposing on these able young men was far from burdensome, except possibly for them.

When the Laudian professorship of Arabic first fell vacant in 1887, Margoliouth, not yet 30, applied for it, but as Beeston explains, no appointment was made, surely because the electors were unable to agree on a suitable candidate. They received permission to adjourn for two years, whereupon Margoliouth applied again and was successful. One reason, I suggest, was his work in the intervening period. In 1889 he published a text of *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* by Japheth ben Ali, and referred in the Preface to his four months' study of manuscripts of it which were temporarily on loan from St Petersburg to the Bodleian.⁵ The work for the book was therefore done in 1888, before Margoliouth's second application for the professorship. The text he published was in Arabic script for the most part, but it was based on scribes' transcriptions from Hebrew and was not, therefore a pure testimony to Margoliouth's own mastery of the Arabic language. Nor were the letters supporting his candidacy, at least those which are preserved in the Bodleian. One was from an undergraduate in Balliol who had attended lectures by Margoliouth on Arabic and was sure he would make an excellent teacher. Another was from the professor of Arabic in Königsberg complimenting him on his book on Aristotle's *Poetics* but admitting he had not yet read it. Another was from S. R. Driver, the Regius Professor of Hebrew, a fellow Wykehamist and also a fellow of New College, who had examined Margoliouth's dissertation on Ben Sira and awarded him the Senior Kennicott Scholarship in Hebrew: 'as a professor of Syriac', he writes, revealingly, 'he would be a stimulating teacher and an energetic researcher'. Another is praise in Arabic verse from a Shafi'ite sheikh in Cairo. Another, tellingly, is from the Christian bishop of Homs: it is not a testimonial but an effusion about the unexpected news of Margoliouth's decision to apply.

I am delighted and overjoyed, remembering that you have never dwelt in an Arab country nor had any Arab with you in your University who might have talked with you or to whom you might have talked. Whence then have you obtained this knowledge? And whence this eloquence? But the fact is that the wisdom of God can do whatever it chooses.

Indeed, it might seem to have done so, but Margoliouth's appointment had a certain logic. During the 19th century Arabic had mostly been valued in Oxford as an aid to missionary work

⁴ 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)

⁵ Japheth ben Ali ha-Levi, *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, ed. and trans. D. S. Margoliouth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889), p. xii.

to convert the 'Mohammedans' to Christianity. Although the recent long-serving Laudian professor, Robert Gandell, had been an honourable exception, even he had had to serve as a lecturer in Hebrew at the same time. Margoliouth's profound Christian commitment and exceptional linguistic talents would be well known and his recent editing of a commentary on the Biblical book of Daniel in Arabic script would certainly tell in his favour. It is remarkable that his inaugural lecture, delivered in 1890, made no reference to Arabic or to his chair. It was entitled *An Essay on the Place of Ecclesiasticus in Semitic Literature*, and developed the argument of his prizewinning dissertation a few years earlier. The lecture is remarkably detailed, but nobody present is known to have complained that it was not on the subject for which the professor had been appointed but on one appropriate for a regius professor of Hebrew, currently the excellent Driver.

Even before his appointment Margoliouth's grasp of the Arabic language, largely self-taught, was well up to the high level expected of a Laudian professor. Within four years he had completed a fine edition of Arabic papyri in the Bodleian. A year later he published his first invaluable translation of Arabic into English, one of an Arabic commentary on the third Sura of the Koran. He went on to translate the massive biographical dictionary of Yaquṭ, a task requiring many volumes until its conclusion in 1927. For Arabists, he came to resemble a one-man version of the newly launched Loeb library whose translations of classical texts were appearing meanwhile: unlike Margoliouth's translations, they began a widespread decline in their users' grasp of the ancient languages. Even as Laudian professor, Margoliouth's vast output never narrowed to Arabic only. The range of his linguistic competence remained exceptional. The college archives contain a letter of his in November 1891 to a Mr Robinson, probably an Oxford correspondent, in which Margoliouth explains, 'Of languages of which I am at all acquainted, Coptic is the only one which has a special form for the copula', and in four lucid pages goes on to argue why a substantive verb might be used instead, meeting a need to qualify the proposition *temporally*. He connects this possibility with usages in old Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin and contrasts them with all the Semitic languages. He then moves on to explain why *predicates* are in the accusative in the only Semitic languages which have cases.⁶ No subsequent fellow of the college could have written such a letter, apparently on the spur of the moment.

Two personal memoirs of Margoliouth are invaluable. One is an obituary for the British Academy by the infinitely humane and sensitive Gilbert Murray who was both Margoliouth's New College colleague and later his neighbour on Boars Hill. The other is for the Royal Asiatic Society by Hamilton Gibb, Margoliouth's younger contemporary and rightful successor to his claim to be the outstanding Arabic scholar of the time. Even so, more, I believe, needs to be stated.

Murray recalls Margoliouth's deep musical voice, his 'melancholy expression', the odd way he pronounced the letter 'r' in a Parisian, not English, manner. He remarks that: 'Unlike most scholars, he was a brilliant linguist and enjoyed conversing in abstruse languages. Somewhat silent in English, and not much stimulated by French or German, he became full of conversation when addressed in Arabic or Turkish'.⁷ He cannot have been an easy draw for neighbours in the SCR. He also gave teaching in Ethiopic if desired and had a good knowledge of Armenian and Persian.

For more than 50 years, from his professorship until 1940, this tall, increasingly gaunt figure was to be seen in college, a person of whom subsequent fellows have been ignorant though they are treading in his long-present footsteps. Such a figure was sure to spawn legend, especially when some of his theories were rumoured to be very odd. He had a dog whom he used to address in formal language and at times, a cat in college. Maurice Bowra, an undergraduate at New College in the early 1920s, is the source for the story that Margoliouth's cat wandered onto High Table and sometimes ate some of the food. He added that Margoliouth is said to have responded dismissively that 'after all, the cat was a Muslim one', words which are perhaps not quite what he said.

⁶ New College Archives, Oxford, NCA PA/ROB/5/1.

⁷ Murray, 'David Samuel Margoliouth', 396, 390.

In his seventies Margoliouth would still drive into Oxford from Boars Hill, albeit in a rather antiquated car. Unlike other reluctant modernisers in college, he had a practical mind, and had taken a three-week professional course in the mechanics of car engines. Murray considers that 'Never was a learned man less apt to wax enthusiastic over the value of learning. He liked things to be difficult. He liked solving abstruse problems'.⁸ Indeed he did, or at least proposing solutions to them, sometimes of the most bizarre nature. The fine line between being provocative in order to elicit a helpful response, being not altogether serious without saying so, and being way off-piste is one that needs to be drawn carefully when considering his enormous body of work.

Margoliouth, Murray states, 'had not much sensitiveness to beauty in art or letters, and certainly no tendency to overvalue it': an exception exists, nonetheless. He was 'interested in his work, interested in play, and in his own sense of humour'. However, 'what really stirred him', Murray continues, 'was pity for human suffering'. In such cases, 'all irony and scepticism fell away; he was ready to give most generously both of time and money'.⁹ This profound quality was enhanced by his marriage to Jessie in 1899 and the active awareness of social injustices she brought into his life. He was never withdrawn in an ivory tower, nor was he harsh or unkind in the many of his book reviews I have read. He shows no sign of being curmudgeonly or of descending into bouts of depression between heightened phases of prolific writing.

Gibb presents Margoliouth as an internationally recognised Arabic scholar, especially skilled in editing and translating Arabic texts. However, he also cites the three books Margoliouth published between 1905 and 1914 on Mohammed and Mohammedanism. He acknowledges the solid learning which went into them, especially the last of the three, and recognises that they stood for a generation as standard English works on their subjects. He adds, however, that 'the ironical tone which informed his observations disturbed many of his European and sometimes infuriated his Muslim readers. The soundness of his judgment was inevitably called in question where insight rather than literary scholarship was demanded'. Nonetheless he commends Margoliouth's readiness to help genuine applicants, and adds that: 'Strangers found him reserved, formal, perhaps a little formidable, but on closer acquaintance they were surprised to discover not only friendliness and gentleness, but a quick sense of humour'.¹⁰

There are various strands here which I wish to pursue: the philological and textual brilliance, the irony, the apparent detachment, the rather limited humour, and the tone which at times infuriated Muslim and even European readers, co-existing with exceptional kindness, sensitivity to injustice, and a willingness, if possible, to help.

I will begin by exploring them through Margoliouth's less remembered works, those about texts in the Bible. He was a profound Christian, ordained by the Bishop of Liverpool and made both a priest and a deacon in the same year, 1899. His sympathies were low church, evangelical in the scope of the term at that time. These fundamental convictions will remain important in almost everything I will explore, to a degree not brought out by Murray or Gibb.

I

Margoliouth's first publications were in the classical field, two learned but not very influential studies, one on the text of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, the other on the first 243 lines of Sophocles's *Trachiniae*. I cannot dwell here on his detailed work on the histories of the Jew Josephus, including a translation, nor on his book *The Poetics of Aristotle: Translated from Greek into English and from Arabic into Latin, with a Revised Text, Introduction, Commentary Glossary and Onomasticon* (1911). Murray classes it as 'a strange work, impossible to accept as it stands, yet not safely to be neglected by serious

⁸ *ibid.*, 396.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ 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. 393, 394.

students'.¹¹ Perilously, perhaps, they have been doing so ever since. When I studied the *Poetics* with C. G. Hardie, then with Donald Russell and Margaret Hubbard in Oxford in 1966, none of them or their bibliographies mentioned it.

In 1887 Margoliouth also published a book about Oriental observations on Aristophanes's poetry. For it, he edited Arabic and Syriac translations and then used them in textual criticism of the Greek tradition. In Murray's view, the result was 'valuable and learned' but it remains most peculiar.¹² Margoliouth comments ironically on misunderstandings by Aristophanes's Oriental translators and allows himself some wry humour at their expense, but he and they are also commenting on the most hilarious comedies whose very different humour, frequently bawdy, he never discusses.

In 1889 he published his translation and edition of the commentary on the Book of Daniel by Japheth ben Ali, the one which I believe to have impressed electors to his chair. Japheth was a prominent and polemical scholar who was a Karaite Jew, with a strict sense, therefore, of scriptural exactitude, an approach which surely appealed to Margoliouth's evangelical Christian mind. His New College colleague, S. R. Driver, the Regius Professor of Hebrew, was differently disposed, a practitioner of the higher criticism of the Bible which evangelicals rejected. To do his edition Margoliouth consulted no fewer than ten manuscripts and concluded plausibly that the text was composed between 990 and 1010 AD. On the way, he showed a correct awareness that the prophecies in Daniel were all composed after the events they described, a view, however, which he modified in later articles.

The threads I wish to follow run through his subsequent work on the Book of Ben Sira, Ecclesiasticus in the Christian Old Testament, and on the Wisdom of Solomon in the Christian Apocrypha. In 1890, Margoliouth published his inaugural lecture, the one which considered the place of Ecclesiasticus in Semitic literature. His major contention in it was correct: behind the Greek text we now have, there indeed lay a lost Hebrew original. However, he pursued two further contentions, that parts of the book, if reconstructed in Hebrew, were demonstrably in poetic metre, and also that their original Hebrew had been what he called New Hebrew, a category which he regarded as post-exilic. The lost original of Ecclesiasticus, he argued, showed that this New Hebrew existed by c. 200 BC and was still a living language. It would later develop into Rabbinic Hebrew, which many of Margoliouth's contemporaries considered, wrongly, to be a dead and artificial construction.

His arguments are very detailed, especially for an inaugural lecture. They concentrate on individual Greek passages which are indeed hard to understand, but according to Margoliouth become intelligible when cured of textual error and restored to Hebrew. Here, his own New College can come to the rescue. Its current Esmée Fairbairn junior research fellow, Shoni Lavie-Driver, has considered at my request Margoliouth's reconstructions and philological procedure and sent me a review which Margoliouth happily died too soon to receive. 'The aim to show that the original was metrical is still unproven and in general, implausible: attempting to reconstruct the meter of a Biblical book you don't possess', remarks Lavie-Driver, 'should have you locked away for life. Especially if your reconstruction contains the phrase "trimeter pro-catalectic" or part of your proof is that there are verses that you are unable to reconstruct'. Margoliouth's attempt to construct an 'original lost Hebrew text' is particularly ill-judged now that we know that Hebrew texts of one and the same scriptural work could vary widely, and no single one was definitive. After checking one of Margoliouth's detailed examples, Lavie-Driver remarks to me that 'everything he could get wrong, he did. Of the seven words that he comments on specifically to explain his theory, six he got wrong'. His method of reconstructing 'New Hebrew' appeals to words in Arabic or Syriac, a mis-based method. However, Margoliouth was remarkably tenacious about his results, as two sequels show, neither of which he expected at the time.

¹¹ Murray, 'David Samuel Margoliouth', 391.

¹² *ibid.*, 390.

In 1894–5, the great Hebrew scholar Solomon Schechter published a fragment in Hebrew of part of the Book of Ecclesiasticus, found among the debris of deliberately discarded texts, the so-called Genizah, of a medieval synagogue in Cairo, acquired by the Scottish twins Agnes S. Lewis and Margaret D. Gibson. So far from hailing it as a proof of his general theory that the book had indeed had a Hebrew original, Margoliouth dismissed this new arrival in, for him, unusually extreme and disparaging terms. He considered it to be a translation from a late Persian translation which was in turn based on a Greek one. In 1913 he was still describing it as ‘A bad medieval retranslation made from texts already in our possession [which] was neither worth preserving nor worth destroying; it was therefore thrown into the waste-paper basket, where it had best have been left’.¹³

Others, rightly, were unconvinced, and in due course were proved right. In 1965, 25 years after Margoliouth's death, part of a scroll of Ben Sira's work was found at Masada in Israel: its script dated it to the first century BC. Its Hebrew closely matched the Cairo Genizah fragment, but not Margoliouth's attempted reconstruction, one which was clearly wrong. I think, however, there was more at work behind his stubbornness. He was looking on his New Hebrew as a stage in the language's evolution, one which allowed the earlier Hebrew of the prophetic books to be dated many centuries earlier, correctly, although other voices were disputing this dating when he wrote. His work thus reinforced his convictions about the Bible. He continued to publish on the question, but never once weakened in his conviction that his reconstruction had been right: it was not.

As for the Wisdom of Solomon, he was justly appreciative of its arresting contents and particularly the remarkable verses of our chapters 1 and 2 about the conduct of an amoral group in society. As human life, they consider, is brief, and death is final, these wicked people decide to enjoy sybaritic pleasure, drink costly wine, crown themselves with rosebuds ‘before they be withered’, and oppress the widows and the righteous poor. However, a righteous man remains and reproaches the wicked's behaviour and ‘is grievous unto us even to behold, Because his life is unlike other men's, And his paths are of strange fashion’. They remark that he is ‘boastfully’ presenting himself as the son of God, and so they lay a plot to test him and torture him to see if God will rescue him: if He does not, they will kill him. They duly do so. Margoliouth was much struck by this remarkable tale of the testing and killing of a pre-Christian son of God, and indeed it was the text that, independently of him, I chose to read as a lesson in New College Chapel in the last evensong of Trinity term 1997 during my sub-wardenship. It greatly impressed those present, who did not know it.

I was not aware then that Margoliouth had cited it in the same chapel. On 30 May 1920, for the Feast of the Trinity, he gave a long sermon there which he entitled ‘The Sword of The Spirit’. A printed text of it ‘for Private Circulation’ is preserved in the college archives, and is a tribute to his range of allusion and linguistic understanding, rhetorical skills, and acute observations about human values. He based it round the remarkable, but seldom studied, list of Old Testament ‘heroes’ in the Wisdom of Solomon, men, Margoliouth explained, who were not military conquerors but ‘were found capable of dealing with great emergencies’. He enlarges the list by deftly tracing the qualities which God's Spirit or Wisdom instilled in them and by giving a concise account of the way in which the author had assumed the Spirit to operate. Thanks to it, the beneficiaries became ‘friends of God and prophets’.

Before following up this theme, the main one of his sermon, Margoliouth digressed briefly to show that the Book of Wisdom also addressed the Son's relation to God: it was another apt theme for a Feast of the Trinity. To that end, he referred to its passage about the wicked's testing of a self-styled son of God and cleverly related it to the remarks attributed to onlookers at Jesus's crucifixion. In Matthew's Gospel, elaborating what Mark and therefore Luke drew on, the remarks have a striking resemblance. Margoliouth comments that the passage in Wisdom ‘is in the thoughts

¹³ D. S. Margoliouth, ‘The Zadokites’, *The Expositor*, eighth series 6 (1913), 157–64, at p. 157.

of the Evangelist'. He also suggests that when the disciples are 'asked whether according to the Scriptures Christ ought not to have suffered first and then entered into His glory, the Scripture whence they might most easily have learned it is a passage in this book'.¹⁴ As most of the disciples knew no Greek, this suggestion required the Book of Wisdom to be known already in Hebrew, a belief which Margoliouth already held on other grounds. He skirts round the further implication of the question posed in the Gospel, that it was said to have been put by the risen Christ to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. When He expounds why He had to suffer first, then enter into glory, He expounds this necessity from 'all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself', 'beginning with Moses and all the prophets' (Luke 24:27). Margoliouth's suggestion of a debt to Wisdom would apply not only to the disciples but to Christ.

The compressed subtleties which he stated here were a remarkable start to a sermon which lasted for at least 25 minutes, according to my oral repetition of it. His notably melodious voice may have carried the congregation along, but the points being made were condensed from deep thought and independent study.

In a separate publication, 20 years earlier, he had already argued that behind Wisdom's Greek text lay a lost Hebrew original. To establish it, he had applied a similar method to the one he applied to Ecclesiasticus: he isolated obscurities in the existing Greek texts and argued that they would make better sense if turned into his New Hebrew. Once again, he was stretching many points, and once again new evidence appeared.

In 1885–6 another textual fragment from Cairo, surely from the same Genizah, had reached the Bodleian Library and was read in a preliminary way by John F. Stenning in Oxford. It was seen to be a palimpsest, that is, a text written over an under-text. Stenning was so puzzled by the traces of what seemed to be an Aramaic under-text that he called on Margoliouth to assist. Brilliantly, Margoliouth realised that the under-text was Wisdom of Solomon 9:8–10:2 written in Christian Palestinian Aramaic. Stenning then published it in 1896 with appropriate thanks. However, he remarked justly that the fragment's text was close to the Septuagint's Greek of the same passage, a fact which implied that its original had been Greek too.

By a fine coincidence, this fragmentary text has just acquired a further history, also linked to New College. In February 2023, Christa Müller-Kessler, mother of Estella, our valued lecturer in classics at the time, brilliantly identified another fragment of the same manuscript in Cambridge's University Library, realising it contained Wisdom of Solomon 13:1–11. The fragments of the palimpsest are extremely hard to decipher and in places, damaged, but the text's script places it in the late 5th–7th century AD. Müller-Kessler's recent find makes it even more likely that a Greek original lay behind the Christian Palestinian Aramaic fragments, refuting Margoliouth's contention that the original had been Hebrew: that view commands no scholarly assent now, least of all from those as fond of the Book of Wisdom's current text as I am.

Margoliouth's contrary contention is most fully set out in some of the most wrong-headed assertions by any major scholar linguistically at a peak and active for many years in New College. Significantly, he first published it in a Christian journal, *The Expositor*, entitling his study 'Lines of Defence of the Biblical Revelation', he began with an assertion of amazing boldness. The Hellenistic pastoral poet Theocritus's 'native language', he stated, 'must have been Hebrew or Syriac', one of many reasons being that Theocritus cannot distinguish between 'daughter-in-law' and 'bride', just as the Septuagint's texts of the Hebrew scriptures in Greek cannot, either. Intending to use Theocritus as a means of fixing a date and original language for the Wisdom of Solomon, Margoliouth backed this opening bombshell with a detailed series of linguistic observations, never advanced before or since.¹⁵

¹⁴ 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), pp. 3, 2, New College Archives, Oxford, NCA PA/JOS/17/1.

¹⁵ D. S. Margoliouth, 'Lines of Defence of the Biblical Revelation: I: The Bible of the Gentiles', *The Expositor*, sixth series 1 (1900), 32–52, at p. 32 n. 2.

I have checked each in the fundamental commentary on Theocritus by A. S. F. Gow, the supreme classicist at Trinity College, Cambridge, which was published in 1950. He shows no awareness of Margoliouth's ingenious arguments. Their publication is not even in his bibliography, yet in one or two places Gow too is puzzled by the Greek, just as Margoliouth had been before him. Unlike Gow, Margoliouth postulated a Hebrew original in order to resolve the impasse.

His knowledge of Theocritus's *Idylls* is detailed and independent. An example is *Idyll* 10.26–9, where a bucolic singer says of his lady love that she is sun-burnt and others call her Syrian, though he does not. Margoliouth expatiates on the lack of appreciation of sun-burnt skin by Greek poets, and points instead to the Song of Solomon 1:5, a text which was certainly composed in Hebrew: 'I am black, because the sun hath looked on me'. Naturally, the Theocritean fox who is waiting in *Idyll* 1 to eat grapes in a vineyard is compared by Margoliouth to the foxes who are eating grapes in the Song of Solomon 2:15. Other examples allow him to relate Theocritus's Greek not just to the Song but to the Wisdom of Solomon too.

I have spent fascinating hours tracking them and Gow's comments on the same passages, or lack of them, and appreciating the underlying habits of mind of these two fine classical linguists, although Gow was expert only in Greek and Latin. When the wicked in the Wisdom of Solomon resolve in that memorable chapter 2 verses 2 and 7–8 to enjoy their brief life in drinking, oppressing the poor and so forth, it is Margoliouth who adduces a slightly similar sentiment in Lucretius's Latin poem *On the Nature of Things* 3.912. He infers that ultimately, Lucretius must be indebted to some inherited knowledge of the Wisdom of Solomon, a text, therefore, which had circulated before Lucretius's poem's date of c. 50 BC.

Margoliouth goes on to make two unusual points. The author of Wisdom, he rightly observes, avoids Hebrew personal names and never uses the name Egypt. Margoliouth then argues that he was a Jew in Palestine who was composing before 265 BC, and that a text of the book was available to Theocritus: this dating is already far earlier than those inferred by well-grounded modern scholarship. Margoliouth then becomes bolder, arguing that Wisdom's original text, being Hebrew, existed even earlier and may well go back before the time of the exile and be composed by none other than Solomon himself.

He is even more sure of this dating for the Song of Songs. Language in it, he thinks, shows that its original text, in an earlier type of Hebrew, has been misunderstood by the transmitter of the text we have. An example, he claims, is the use throughout of a word in New Hebrew meaning 'breasts' (*dadain*), in place of the old Hebrew word for 'love' (*dodim*) which had stood, Margoliouth assumes, in the original text but then become obsolete. Elsewhere, words from Nabataean and even Arabic are identified, showing that the 'purity of the earlier Hebrew' had begun to be diluted, a process which already distressed Nehemiah on his visit to Jerusalem in c. 433 BC. As for the Song's content, 'the historical facts that shine through show us Palestine united and peaceful, such as it was only in the great king's days'. Its 'bloom and freshness' and 'sense of rich fragrance of the country' must reflect the halcyon days of Solomon. Margoliouth declares that we should take seriously ancient attributions of biblical works to named authors, just as we take seriously their later insertions of vowel-marks and so forth, not a compelling argument as these vowel marks are much later. 'Anonymous works', he considers, 'are seldom good', and so the traditional attribution to Solomon must stand.

Here, he misunderstands the role of anonymity in 'Old Testament' books. It is a feature of the narrative books, but not of the books of prophecy: the reason is that authors used it artfully to confer apparent objectivity on their narrative, as if it was *the* narrative, whereas they named authors for books of prophecy because a name from the past conferred authority on them. After endorsing Solomon as the author, a preposterously unscholarly view, Margoliouth ends his wild flight of fancy by considering why the Song of Solomon is often favourable to an imagery of wine, love, and indeed, the naked body. He argues that there is a concealed underlying meaning to it which we must not miss. Citing the poet Hafiz as an example, he claims that the deep significance of this erotic and hedonistic language is mystical. He even believes that this depth is self-evident in the

book's final chapter. He must have struggled with 8:8, 'we have a little sister, and she hath no breasts', though he probably regarded the word 'breasts' as an error for the word 'love' in the lost Hebrew original. 8:14 was no easier for his view, 'make haste, my beloved, and be thou like to a roe or to a young hart upon the mountains of spices'. The ancient view that the contents of the Song had begun life as an erotic poem sung as a dialogue while drinking is still eminently convincing.

At every level, Margoliouth's inclination in this defence is misguided. The underlying reason then shines through: 'the fact that it was by Solomon gave it a place in the Bible and that place was utilized by Providence to introduce the preparation for the Gospel'. It was in the previous year, 1899, that he had become an ordained Christian priest and deacon, one on the evangelical wing of the church. This commitment underlies his decision to write a defence of Biblical revelation in 1901. It also caused him to misdate what he set out to defend.

So far, Margoliouth had been brilliantly right in his contention that there was a Hebrew original behind our Greek Ecclesiasticus, but disastrously mistaken in his reconstructions and claims for it. He had shown precisely the obstinacy on which even the kindly Gilbert Murray commented: he refused to revise his views in the face of new evidence which in many ways he should have welcomed. As for the Wisdom of Solomon, he was disastrously wrong in his main contention that its Hebrew original had been lost, but brilliantly correct in his identification of an extremely challenging fragment in Christian Palestine Aramaic. Yet he never cited that fragment again. One reason may have been the date of its script, too late, he might have considered, to oblige him to rethink. Another problem was that it implied that the original text of Wisdom had been in Greek, not Hebrew. If so, his view of the evolution of Hebrew was unfounded, and his view that it entailed an early dating of the Biblical books was subverted. His stubbornness about both books was related to his faith in the Scriptures' fundamental truth. His stubborn fundamentalism was the very opposite of the cautious and duly critical method of his New College colleague, S. R. Driver, professor of Hebrew. Once, they crossed swords in print in a scholarly context, but their professional differences did not undermine their personal relations and collegiality. There would soon be other examples of this heartening duality.

II

Within six years of his defence of biblical revelation, Margoliouth made two further forays, likewise related to dating and authenticity. The same patterns of thought were still entrenched in him, ready to re-emerge eight years later in the most bizarre of all his publications. One foray hit its target brilliantly, the other missed it spectacularly.

In 1901, Aurel Stein had found a fragmentary text in Khotan in a script and language which he handed to Margoliouth for study. In 1903 Margoliouth published his conclusions, that the text was written in Hebrew and Persian and was the property of a well-placed Jew, probably a merchant, active at Khotan. He was inclined to date it as early as 718 AD, making it far the earliest attestation of a Jew in central Asia and its type of Persian, 'Judeo-Persian'. It was left to the equal brilliance of W. B. Henning many years later to re-examine the letter's fragments, to clarify and correct yet more of their text, and in 1957 to argue, again convincingly, that it should probably be dated a few decades earlier. I doubt that even Henning would have reached this stage without Margoliouth's preliminaries.

The other foray was idiosyncratic, into a dead end. In the 1890s Margoliouth had given a very favourable review to the first book published by an excellent scholar, A. E. Cowley, but in 1906 he expressed serious reservations about the second, Cowley's superb co-edition of Aramaic papyri from Elephantine in Egypt, published in that year. Cowley dated most of these texts to the fifth century BC, and attributed them convincingly to the descendants of Jews settled in Egypt on military service. Subsequent studies have in large measure confirmed this attribution. However, Margoliouth's initial judgement was that 'Linguistically, much of the matter contained in the

Sachau papyri appears to the present writer highly suspicious'. Yet again, he argued from individual words in one or two of the texts, ones which seemed to him philologically explicable only in terms of much later languages and usage, including modern Persian, Armenian, and late Hebrew. He then adduced a modern factory for papyrus which was operating at Syracuse: 'when there is a factory, there must be a market for its output'. The German expedition which had brought back the documents went, he said, for the express purpose of discovering Aramaic documents belonging to the old Jewish colony. He is hinting that it might have composed fakes, presumably on pre-bought papyrus from Sicily. The 'first papyrus edited by Dr. Sachau', he considered, 'looked in facsimile as if it had been written very recently': its spelling of the name *Kambyses* 'had a savour', he thought, 'of the German pronunciation of the name'. Another document, supposedly sent from Elephantine, should not have been found at Elephantine, as the keeping of copies of 'state documents', Margoliouth claimed, did not begin until the seventh century AD with one of the Caliphs, and anyway the letter was only a begging letter, most unlikely, therefore, to be copied and kept at source.¹⁶

His claim about copies of state documents is mistaken, and his other points can be refuted. As for that modern papyrus factory, I have enjoyed discovering a prompt riposte, sent to the next issue of the *Expositor* by his admiring contemporary, Agnes Smith Lewis, herself a polyglot of similar calibre and a firsthand researcher into Syriac and Christian Palestinian Aramaic texts both at and from St Catherine's Monastery on Sinai. After thanking Margoliouth for his kindness and brilliance to her in other contexts, she remarks that unlike him, she had actually visited the papyrus growing wild on the Anapo River in Sicily, (I have too), and could refute the notion that it would ever be sufficient to sustain a factory.

I have dwelt on these works because qualities in them lead into Margoliouth's most extraordinary publications, those on the life and work of Homer and the dates of Euripides's plays. On 4 January 1915 he gave a lecture entitled 'The Life and Work of Homer', of which an uncorrected proof for prior circulation survives in New College Library, fittingly so, as Margoliouth was for many years its assiduous librarian. In his neat hand he wrote prompt replies to all manner of inquiries, including those hardy perennials, attempts by old members to dump books onto the college collection. In his Homer lecture Margoliouth states that even in antiquity, there were those who thought that somewhere in his poems Homer had left his 'cryptic signature'.¹⁷ In his obituary of Margoliouth Gilbert Murray refers to his attraction to solving 'abstruse problems', and even late in life to engaging with crosswords and anagrams. The work on Homer exemplifies both, but its method needs to be appreciated if it is to be seen in a wider context. I will give an outline, necessarily rather complex, but even so, it is a simplification of Margoliouth's full procedure.

He begins by citing examples of acrostics in surviving Greek and Latin texts, especially those made up of the first alphabetic letters of a sequence of verses. He fastens on a condensed version of the *Iliad* in Latin verse, the *Ilias Latina*, which begins, he correctly observes, with eight lines whose first letters, if read in sequence, reveal the author's name, Italicus. Margoliouth dates him 'probably' to the first century AD, rightly so, as he is now accepted to be Baebius Italicus, a senator active in the reign of Nero. Margoliouth does not mention that this acrostic requires the first word of one of the verses to be emended, nor that it is matched by another acrostic in the poem's final eight lines which reads as 'Scripsit', meaning 'He wrote'. Instead, he adds that the Greek poet Epicharmus, about 500 BC, is said to have 'armed most of his works with cryptic signatures, proving that they were his'.¹⁸

Margoliouth treats these examples as a licence for him to apply similar techniques to the Homeric poems. He does not happen to cite the various acrostics which occur in poems falsely

¹⁶ D. S. Margoliouth, 'The Elephantine Papyri', *The Expositor*, eighth series 3 (1912), 69–85, at pp. 71, 72.

¹⁷ D. S. Margoliouth, *The Life and Work of Homer* (London: Victoria Institute, [1915?]), p. 2, New College Library, Oxford, NC/MAR.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 2.

ascribed to Theocritus, though he surely knew them. Nor does he cite a recent find. In 1902, perhaps unknown to him, poems composed and inscribed in Greek in the Hellenistic era at Susa had just been published: they contained acrostics. Since then, verse-acrostics have turned up in Greek texts even further east, as if they were a virtuoso habit for non-Greeks who had acquired an ability to compose Greek verse, much like Margoliouth himself. Recently, scholars have published in major peer-reviewed journals what they see as deliberate acrostics in Virgil's poetry too, ones which spell out personal names, including the name 'Noah' in Faunus's prophecy in the *Aeneid* book 7 as if cryptic meanings were especially apt for a prophetic utterance. I reject the notion that they were deliberately contrived by Virgil, but acrostics were indeed devised in Latin poems far on into late antiquity. I can add a more recent one, contrived by a great classical philologist who was also fascinated by the interplay between Greek and 'Near Eastern' languages. He kindly gave me a copy of his verse-translation of the first book of Homer's *Iliad* one evening after dinner in his Oxford college, and remarked that if I looked closely I would find an acrostic running across part of a page in it, giving the name of his current mistress in London. I have looked, but not discovered it.

Margoliouth rightly accepted that there was no acrostic in the beginning of Homer's *Iliad*, but claimed that 'something unnatural in the text' almost always signifies an underlying cryptic signature. The prologue of the *Iliad*, he claims, contains 'signs of an underlying cryptogram in profusion. Every word of the first line', he states, 'is calculated to provoke criticism, and four out of the five words' already provoked it in antiquity. He focuses on the first word *mēnis*, which most modern commentators regard as a brilliant opening.¹⁹ The only criticism it provokes arises from a modern contention that it must mean 'catastrophic wrath', a mistaken view which led Emily Wilson to mistranslate it as 'cataclysmic' in her recent attempt to present the *Iliad* in a translation 'for our time'.

Margoliouth applies the technique of an anagram, not an acrostic. He cites the Sinhalese poet Dunuvila as an example, a poet in the 18th century AD perhaps known to him through the Royal Asiatic Society, and argues that like him, Homer chose, not one significant letter, but two at the start of each verse in his *Iliad*'s prologue. If the opening pairs of letters are assembled from each of the first seven verses, they can be rearranged as an anagram, one which states, 'of Homer, Poet, from' in Greek.²⁰ Margoliouth then applies a similar technique to the line which precedes the four lines which close most modern texts of the *Odyssey*. To modern scholars these lines are not the ending of Homer's own *Odyssey*, whose original form is itself a complex problem beset by omission and confusion in our manuscripts. However, Margoliouth argues that the letters of this line contain yet another deliberate anagram. Consequently, he unravels it, this time to make a line of iambic verse. He applies this same process to the *Iliad*'s prologue and then to the first ten verses of the *Odyssey*, treating the letters assembled from each text as anagrams of words which were in iambic verse too. He then applies the same technique to the last lines of the *Iliad*. Here too, he treats the first four of them as an anagram of words in iambic verse, but he decodes the fifth and final line separately. He takes the first letter of each of its words, sets them in sequence and reads them as '871' or '874':²¹ numerals in ancient Greek were represented by letters of the alphabet. He then decodes this number by using some arcane evidence from later Greek chronographic sources and renders it ingeniously as 708 BC. Homer, he infers, concealed in the *Iliad*'s last line the very number of the year in which he finished the poem.

The iambic lines which Margoliouth reconstructed here from anagrams are not in the easiest or smoothest Greek, as critics soon observed. Even so they present Homer in, supposedly, his own words identifying himself as the author of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and as patronised by the Aeneadae, rulers in the Troad in the eighth to seventh century BC (this notion was not a novel one). They also show that he was not composing orally: he was writing every single word at

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 3.

²¹ *ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

the beginning and end of his poems with the utmost forethought as he was contriving two layers of meaning for them.

I have simplified what Margoliouth applies and what he then then claims to discover. I will not dwell on the further conclusions which he appends, except to emphasise that he praises Aristotle, rightly, for 'skilfully' making out 'the chief features of Homeric composition'²² but then credits, wrongly, Aristotle's general statements with an awareness of a level of cryptic meaning. Among much else Margoliouth assumes that 'Ilion' was a Semitic place-name and a recent one in Homer's time, so that one of his anagram verses can refer to it as 'New Ilion'. We now know it to be derived from the old Hittite place name Wilusa many centuries before Homer's lifetime.

It would take too long to subvert much else which Margoliouth merely states. Months, even years, had surely gone into its complex detail, perhaps during evenings in his Oxford house, 88 Woodstock Road. I cannot pass by it without superimposing on a window the image of an elderly scholar, bent over self-made puzzles which were totally misguided. His supposed 'discoveries' involved strenuous ingenuity and several changes of direction, from hexameter verse to iambic verse, from single letters of significance to pairs, without valid arguments as to why such moves should be made. To describe them as 'out with the birds' would be unfair to birds. Did Margoliouth really mean them seriously? Murray's obituary recalls him telling a friend that 'the great thing in life is to have an innocent amusement'.²³ After outlining this work on Homer, A. F. L. Beeston asks: 'Can Margoliouth have seriously believed such nonsense, or was he indulging in a laborious joke at the expense of the learned world? Either supposition must unfortunately flaw his own credit for scholarship'.²⁴ Murray prevaricates, saying only that: 'It is difficult to know how far he was serious in the exercises of ingenuity'.²⁵ The difficulty, I will argue, is apparent, not real.

Neither obituarist remarked that *The Life and Work of Homer* was first delivered as a lecture to members of the Victoria Institute in central London, nor did they consider why that venue was significant. Traditional Christian believers in the words of Scripture had founded this Institute in order to combat Darwin's theory of evolution and then, higher criticism of the Bible, the next danger. It was a bastion of fundamentalism, fortified with many Christian evangelical members. There is not the slightest hint or warning of humour in Margoliouth's text nor, as an ordained Christian priest, would he have opted to mislead a select audience of like-minded biblicists with a spoof masquerading as a break-through. Quite the opposite: he explained that his results were not a one-off outcome, which might simply be an accident. They were validated, he believed, because they yielded similarly positive results when their method was applied to other beginnings and endings. 'Accident', he remarked, revealingly, 'can ordinarily be distinguished from design by the fact that the former gives either too little or too much; the latter gives precisely what is required'.²⁶ The creationist argument from design found a new application: anagrammatic decoding.

It is significant that Margoliouth began his lecture by citing the great Homeric critic F. A. Wolf whose general contention in 1795 had been that '*the voice of all antiquity, and generally speaking a unanimous tradition, attests the fact that the Homeric Poems were first committed to writing by Pisistratus*, tyrant of Athens who died 527 B.C.' Margoliouth declared with unaccustomed scorn that 'This supposed result can only be characterized by a phrase too harsh for this audience'.²⁷ True, Wolf was a German, and Margoliouth was speaking in wartime, but the underlying issue here is that Wolf's theory was an example of a theory framed without prior regard for all the available evidence. It was simply imposed by its author. It resembled, therefore, theorising like Darwin's which the Institute existed to reject.

²² *ibid.*, p. 9.

²³ Murray, 'David Samuel Margoliouth', 396.

²⁴ Beeston, 'Margoliouth, David Samuel', *ODNB*.

²⁵ Murray, 'David Samuel Margoliouth', 391.

²⁶ Margoliouth, *Life and Work of Homer*, p. 3.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 1.

New College's proof copy of *The Life and Work of Homer* bears a penned inscription in its upper right corner. I decipher it as 'H.W.B.J.', letters which are the initials of Margoliouth's contemporary in the SCR, the formidable H. W. B. Joseph, fellow and tutor in classical and modern philosophy. He was a most exacting tutor, famous for his remorseless criticism of every sentence in his pupils' work for illogicality. However, Joseph, too, was a member of the Victoria Institute, an evangelical Christian and a committed upholder of biblical evidence, a cardinal fact which the memorable recollections of him by his pupil Maurice Bowra omit. Joseph is said to have been described as a 'myopic ant' by William James, the celebrated philosopher and writer on religious experience. His myopia, I emphasise, was rooted in his biblical faith. It was the driving force in his life-long philosophising against the inherent truth of empirical science and materialism. Copies, like ours, of Margoliouth's lecture were printed so as to be circulated in advance to members and enable discussion by letter or in person: perhaps the provision was a special one for a lecture so detailed and controversial. Even if Joseph initialled his advance copy and then never read it, his potential participation, or even presence, meant the lecture was not one in which to conceal a joke under apparent rationality. No critical comment on the theory is ever attested from Joseph, but his was not a mind with which to play undeclared games.

In the lecture Margoliouth refers to underlying work which he will present in due course. It appeared in the same year, 1915, when he published a second salvo with Blackwell in Oxford, however, not the Oxford University Press. It was a short, but equally extraordinary, book entitled *The Chronograms of the Euripidean Dramas*, 'collected and solved by D. S. Margoliouth, D.Litt., F.B.A.' (as he had become in that very year). Once again Margoliouth purported to show how the opening lines of a Greek author's works contained hidden information about their dates of composition. This time, he attempted to justify his procedure by citing a rare ancient anecdote concerning Heraclides Ponticus and his dialogue with an author who had made public a poem by himself as if his name was Sophocles. This poet is said to have told Heraclides to look at the parallel line, the *parastichis*, 'which was in perfect order'.²⁸ This isolated anecdote, more than a century later than Euripides, is no grounds for assuming that the dramatist engaged in something similar.

The method applied to Euripides was the same as the one applied to Homer, a combination of anagrams and chronography, but as the verses of Euripides's prologues were already in iambic verse there was no need to convert their metre. Like the final line of the *Iliad*, if only in Margoliouth's view, they contained letters which he could assemble, convert into their numerical value, and equate with Olympic years and other festivals apparently mentioned in the text. He then juxtaposed these results with the dates for each play given by Gilbert Murray in the excellent translations he had published between 1902 and 1915. Here is an example. The *Andromache* contains two lines in which she says in her own person, 'I am come to the royal hearth of Priam | Having been given as a wife to bear children to Hector'. Margoliouth applies his technique of rearranging the line's letters, and argues that the second iambic line contains clues to a numerical date. His revised text of it then translates as, '*And as the commencement of the labour upon the drama give ninety feasts of Zeus and subtract one*'. He prints his reckoning beneath it: 'Date Ol.[ympiad] lxxxix. Murray about the same'.²⁹

Readers' first thoughts may be that this text too is an elaborate joke by Margoliouth, partly with Gilbert Murray in mind who was, after all, a fellow of New College at exactly the same time. The lecture on Homer's life and work was also totally contrary to Murray's own views on the rise of the Greek epic through an oral phase of transmission and elaboration until late in the sixth century BC to which someone called Homer was of minimal importance. However, Murray never made a riposte or declared that Margoliouth's two works were elaborate jokes: he ignored them in

²⁸ D. S. Margoliouth, *The Chronograms of the Euripidean Dramas* (Oxford: B. H. Blackwell, 1915), p. 3. The copy held by New College Library, Oxford, at its shelfmark NC/MAR, also has on the upper right corner of its front cover the full signature (this time) of 'H.W.B. Joseph'.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 12.

his own articles, and even in his obituary of Margoliouth, he left the question of their seriousness open.

When Margoliouth published these masterpieces of misguided method he was in his late fifties. In the early 1920s Bowra, an undergraduate at New College, looked on him from afar as someone who had passed his peak and retired into impossible theorising about Homer. That impression was quite wrong. During 1915 Margoliouth had prepared a detailed study on Mahdi and Mahdism which he delivered as a lecture to the British Academy: it contained a fine flurry of texts across many centuries, no overt irony, and no cryptic attempts at unmasking underlying meanings. From 1916 onwards, at the wish of the Foreign Office, he was in India, including Lahore and Karachi, where he lectured on early Islam to big and very appreciative audiences. He returned west to Oxford, though his wife Jessica could not, and spent part of 1918 in Baghdad where Gertrude Bell heard him lecture for 50 minutes in perfectly formed classical Arabic, to the amazed puzzlement of his audience who could not understand much of it or follow his self-taught accent. It was as if in his twenties he had tried to lecture in flawless ancient Greek to a Greek audience whose modern language he did not know and, as a classical scholar, could not even pronounce correctly.

It was apt, then, that meanwhile he was working on major translations of various Arabic memoirs and histories which are still invaluable for anyone interested in the late Abbasid and early Buyid eras. He also delivered the Schweich lectures to the British Academy in 1921 on 'The Relations between Arabs and Israelites prior to the Rise of Islam', and published them as a detailed book, full of textual and linguistic evidence, in 1924. He continued to review dozens of books on very many subjects and to publish challenging papers on early Islamic poetry and language.

In 1923 Margoliouth restated the main contentions of his 1915 Homer lecture in a book, *The Homer of Aristotle*, which had evidently involved him in prolonged study over quite a while. Once again, he published his text with Blackwells, not Oxford University Press. His first chapters were entitled 'The Cipher of Attic Tragedy' and 'The Homeric Cipher', in which it also emerged that Homer had hidden a statement that he was from the island of Ios: Margoliouth then went into much more detail about Aristotle's remarks on poetry than previously. Aristotle's view of Homer has indeed remained a way into assessing the unity, or not, of the Homeric epics. It was still being used in the 1960s to first-term undergraduates by C. G. Hardie in Magdalen College: it has been studied more recently in its own right by his namesake, Philip Hardie, in Cambridge.

As a scholarly reviewer promptly concluded: 'In spite of Prof. Margoliouth's serene conviction of the truth of all these things his treatise is not calculated to persuade many of his readers to share his beliefs'.³⁰ In 1916 the supreme German scholar Wilamowitz had already published a detailed refutation of Margoliouth's method and some of his reconstructions of supposed Homeric Greek. As Margoliouth's arguments became more widely accessible to readers, other ripostes followed, including one in a letter to the *Spectator* magazine which received a prompt dismissal in the letters' column by Margoliouth himself. In the same issue, of 7 June 1924, that column included what I consider to be the most brilliant letter ever sent to the *Spectator* magazine, a category more competitive than recent issues might suggest. The fine Homeric scholar Walter Leaf congratulated Margoliouth with feline irony about his recent discoveries, but proposed that he had been too modest. A rearrangement of the letters used in the first line of Euripides's *Medea* and the second line of the *Iliad* could lead to quite different anagrams. Leaf showed with stunning ingenuity that the name 'Margoliouth' transliterated as a Greek noun could be restored in both, together with assertions that this 'Margoliouthos' had spoken 'left-handedly', that is, by inverting words, surely in anagrams, and 'poured forth' an 'inglorious memorial', that is, without winning him glory for being its author, as his statement of that fact had lain hidden ever since.³¹

³⁰ V. S., '[Review of] The Homer of Aristotle. By D. S. Margoliouth', *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 45(2) (1925), 285.

³¹ D. S. Margoliouth, followed by Walter Leaf, 'Professor Margoliouth's Anagrams', *The Spectator* (7 June 1924), 917.

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day intelligence tests measure something which is inborn and more or less independent of the child's environment and upbringing. He compares intelligence with the soil which the farmer should analyse before sowing the seed. Whatever the mental soil is like at birth, "sowing" begins when the child draws its first breath. The results of application of an intelligence test always depend to a large extent upon the child's past life, as shown by Mr. Hugh Gordon's recent work with gipsy and canal-boat children and other inquiries. They depend also—in spite of Terman's assertions to the contrary—upon social status, home-life (to which Mr. Clarke refers), physique, and the *type* of intelligence (linguistic, mechanical, &c.) which the child happens to possess. At present it is more important, in articles for popular reading, to emphasize the dependence of intelligence upon these post-natal factors than its undoubted relation to certain qualities of the child that are truly "inborn." It may also be pointed out that most present-day tests give more credit to the linguistic and symbolic, than to mechanical and other types of intelligence. We therefore expect (and find) a close relationship between success in such tests and success in school, for the child whose intelligence is of the practical kind has often little scope in a modern school. Your contributor writes more enthusiastically than wisely when he claims that by means of intelligence tests "the work of instructing the young will be changed from heartbreaking drudgery to a delightful occupation." A frequent cause of the drudgery of teaching is the unintelligence, not of the pupils, but of the teacher.

In the past "seven years of mental tests" psychologists have sought to refine our ideas of mental constitution and to provide more and more dependable tests of mental capacities. It would be a pity if tests so carefully evolved were carelessly used—another case of Dante and the blacksmith. Rough and ready estimate of intelligence by the teacher is valuable, and not new, but the teacher who uses standard tests for that purpose is as reprehensible as one who plays football on a bowling green.—I am, Sir, &c.,

E. R. HAMILTON.

University College, North Wales.

PROFESSOR MARGOLIOUTH'S ANAGRAMS.

[To the Editor of the SPECTATOR.]

SIR,—The reviewer of my work, *The Homer of Aristotle*, in your columns, to whom I cannot be sufficiently grateful, states that I am fitted to hold my own in any argument, if allowed a hearing. I hope that may be so; and if I should be assailed by any serious critic with legitimate weapons, I should beg leave to reply, either to admit the objection, if sound, or to refute it, if unsound. I see no occasion to answer any criticism which fails to satisfy these conditions, and Mr. R. J. Walker's letter does not satisfy them. Perhaps I may illustrate what is meant by legitimate weapons. Aristophanes charges the prologue of the *Choephoroe* with obscurity and tautology. No one has ever been able to remove these; and had Aeschylus been alive at the time, a reply might reasonably have been expected from him. The prologues of Euripides are for the most part similarly liable to objection, as the hosts of emendations offered show; but the weapon employed by Aristophanes is illegitimate, since it consists in substituting nonsense of his own for the words of Euripides. There would have been no occasion for Euripides to reply. Similarly I feel no responsibility for Mr. Walker's verses, though I am prepared to consider objections to my own. Aristophanes might well have defended his buffoonery on the ground that it was in place in a comedy. But the same defence would not serve in a philological discussion.—I am, Sir, &c.,

D. S. MARGOLIOUTH.

88 Woodstock Road, Oxford.

[To the Editor of the SPECTATOR.]

SIR,—A great principle of criticism, once discovered, cumulatively proves itself by leading from one discovery to another. Mr. Walker in last week's *Spectator* has thus clinched Mr. Margoliouth's epoch-making invention of the anagram by further and wholly convincing extensions. But a palmary discovery still waits to be revealed to an astonished world. The famous drama named the *Medea* has for centuries been

falsely attributed to Euripides. It was written by another eminent hand. Take the first line:—

εὖθ' ὤφελ' Ἀργοῦς μὴ διαπτέσθαι σκάφος,

and seek the tell-tale anagram. What emerges? Why,

Μαργωλιούθος, σκαῖά φάς, ἔφη τὰδε.

Plainly σκαῖά φάς, literally "speaking left-handedly," indicates the anagram. Translate "Inverting words, M.....th told this tale."

But this is not all. Let us look once more at the opening of the *Iliad*, and we can discover a secret which Mr. Margoliouth, all too shy, has concealed from us.

Μῆνιν ἄειδε, θεά, Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος
οὐλομένην, ἣ μυρ' Ἀχαιοῖς ἄλγε' ἔθηκεν.

The first line can stand untouched; but rewrite the second anagrammatically, and we get the astounding result, the real author of the immortal *Iliad*,

ἀλγὰ μείνεν ἦν Μαργωλιούθος ἔχευε

"The inglorious memorial which Margoliouth poured forth!"

Inglorious indeed through three millennia; it has brought him no fame hitherto. How fortunate that he should still be with us to receive at last the homage of the ages! *Onorate l'altissimo poeta!*—I am, Sir, &c.,

WALTER LEAF.

6 Sussex Place, N.W. 1.

HOW CAN PEACE AND PROSPERITY BE RESTORED?

[To the Editor of the SPECTATOR.]

SIR,—I am venturing to ask for the hospitality of your columns for the purpose of bringing before your readers the conditions of the award of £2,000 in 37 amounts (ranging from £1,000 to £10) for the best and most practicable answers to the question, "How can Peace and Prosperity be Restored in Great Britain and in Europe through International Co-operation?" The Competition is open to British subjects resident in any part of the world, and closes on June 28th. The conditions governing the award of the prizes are simple, and can be obtained on application to myself at 13 John Street, Adelphi, London, W.C. 2. A stamped addressed envelope should be enclosed. It is safer for intending competitors to have a copy of these regulations because, although simple, they must be adhered to.

The aim of the Competition is, naturally, far more than the award of 37 prizes. It is, in fact, an attempt to induce thinking British citizens to express quite freely their own ideas in regard to a problem which affects the future profoundly. The whole conception and method of the Competition harmonizes with a pure educational experiment. There is, and can be, no ulterior motive. The Committee is broad based and representative in every sense of the word. It is not intended to publish the names of the Judges until after the Competition has closed, but it may be taken for granted that they are such as will command the respect of every reasonable competitor. There is a danger that men who have given a good deal of time and thought to the question may think it rather unfair for them to submit their plans for competition. If they are hindered by such a thought then they will be doing the Competition much disservice. They may rest assured that every good and reasonable idea submitted in any of the plans will be brought into the final result. On the other hand, it is specially enjoined that literary merit shall not determine the award of the prizes. The whole competition is, in fact, a real channel for ideas. In the three weeks remaining, therefore, we hope that as many of your readers as possible will develop and submit plans.—I am, Sir, &c.,

ALBERT MANSBRIDGE

(Hon. Director, British Peace Award).

13 John Street, Adelphi, London, W.C. 2.

[We hope a good many of our readers will compete, and obtain a predominant share in the awards.—Ed. *Spectator*.]

GROW YOUR OWN FOOD.

[To the Editor of the SPECTATOR.]

SIR,—My good friend, Mr. J. G. Gilchrist, appears to be excited that I should go to the working man and say to him, "Feed yourself and save your salary." Now, Mr. Gilchrist is a thinking man. He must see that if enough of that could be done, it would solve a lot of problems. He only does not see

This devastating demonstration was never answered or even mentioned by Margoliouth in print. As his views on the Hebrew text of Ecclesiasticus had exemplified, he was never one to relinquish work of his own when fatally challenged. Instead, in 1925, he published a brief pamphlet with Blackwells on *The Colophons of the Iliad & Odyssey* 'as deciphered by D. S. Margoliouth, with a reply to some criticisms of Herr v. Wilamowitz Möllendorf'. There was not a hint here that his decipherment might be a *jeu d'esprit*: the only humour was some ponderous irony deployed against Wilamowitz's examples of Greek which he alleged to be un-Homeric. In 1927 Margoliouth then published a separate article, 'Wit and Humour in Arabic Authors', in which he remarked that 'it is doubtful whether any one has improved on the theory of Aristotle that what excites laughter is some feeling which is not associated with pain'.³² This rather reduced summary of Aristotle's view did not leave scope for anything like concealed mock-serious humour at a reader's expense. Margoliouth went on to print humorous passages from Arabic authors and append earnest comments beneath each of them.

Between 1915 and 1925 he had set out his decipherments of Homer and Euripides in no fewer than four separate publications. Perhaps he had begun by playing with one example, initially as an 'innocent amusement', but when he applied the same method to ever more texts and began to find results in each case, apparently validating it, he took it up seriously and regarded it as a breakthrough. His repeated publications of the results are proofs, I believe, of his serious commitment to them. He then turned to write on other topics but did not abandon this decoding: twelve years later he stated his results yet again in a context and publication which obituaries of him do not mention.

As soon as he retired as Laudian professor in 1937, he gave a lecture in that very November to the Bacon Society in London on 'The Use Of Cypher in Greek Antiquity'. Without giving any response to previous critics he restated his earlier views with a significant addition at the end. He presented his series of decipherments as examples of patient data collection, followed by inference, the process which characterised the scientific method proposed by Francis Bacon, presiding genius of the society to which he was speaking. The implication, I suggest, is that grandiose theorising which is preceded by consideration of only a small part of the available evidence is invalid. In biblicists' stubborn opinion, Darwin's theory was one such example. Margoliouth's decipherments exemplified the opposite, in accordance with the Bacon Society's own notion of science. It was also perfectly suited to another of the Society's aims, to study evidence for Bacon's authorship of plays ascribed to Shakespeare, cryptographic evidence being a primary aid. In the discussion afterwards prominent members congratulated him on his convincing demonstration. No dissenting comments are recorded.

Looking back, Bowra recalled that Margoliouth possessed a famously complex and slightly haphazard mind, that he would occasionally publish books or theories that were almost incomprehensible to his contemporaries, and yet they always contained nuggets of deep, irrefutable scholarship. Also with hindsight, Albert Hourani, Oxford's most perceptive historian of European thought about Islam, considered that in Margoliouth's mind 'there was a streak of fantasy, or perhaps irony, which led him sometimes to propose untenable theories'.³³ As a view from outside, the judgment is convincing, but before we label his work 'mad' or 'crazy', it needs to be put in a contemporary context, one which helps to explain how it seemed to him.

Ciphers and decoding were being applied by various talented men while Margoliouth was writing, perhaps more than he ever knew directly. Already in 1882, the poet Cavafy in Istanbul had received from Alexandria a letter from his close friend Stephen Schilizzi setting out the cryptographic code which should be used in their correspondence about anything private, no doubt mostly sexual. Cavafy continued to use a cryptic version of shorthand in his own diaries, persisting with it through the very years when Margoliouth, no student of modern Greek, was

³² Margoliouth, 'Wit and Humour in Arabic Authors', *Islamic Culture: The Hyderabad Quarterly Review* 1 (October 1927), 522–34, at p. 522.

³³ Albert Hourani, *Islam in European Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 33.

decoding supposed use of ancient Greek ciphers by Homer and Euripides. In wartime, cryptic encoding was also a resource. It features in John Buchan's popular novel *Mr Standfast*, set in 1917–18: time spent on decoding in an official capacity later left a profound mark on the novelist Muriel Spark and her versatile intelligence and fiction.

Surprisingly, Margoliouth never cites the best example of an encoded communication in an ancient Greek text, the one in Aeneas Tacticus's text on siege warfare, composed in the 350s BC. This very work had just been edited with a superb commentary by a young classicist in New College who mirrored much of Margoliouth's own progress. Leslie Hunter had won every prize at Winchester, where a schoolboy had remarked about him at the age of 14 that he 'appears to work incessantly, with vigour worthy of better things, but apart from this did nothing at all'.³⁴ He progressed to New College, was upgraded to a classical scholarship, won every classical prize, and in 1908 even sent a 14-line poem in Greek to Wilamowitz in Berlin, eliciting a reply. In 1910 he received a prize fellowship at Magdalen for his dissertation and commentary on Aeneas: it was eventually published after his death in battle in 1916. Murray admired Hunter greatly and surely mentioned him to Margoliouth, who would have appreciated his fine commentary on the use of cipher in Aeneas's text.

There is no evidence that Margoliouth himself was ever involved in encrypting or decoding in wartime. A search for hidden messages and meanings was also pursued by enthusiasts hunting for clues in Chaucer's poems to delimit their genuine extent. or in Shakespeare about his identity. Foundational works for the claim that cryptograms showed Francis Bacon to be the author of Shakespearean plays were Ignatius Donnelly's *The Great Cryptogram* published in 1888 and Orville Owen's *Sir Francis Bacon's Cipher Story* published in five volumes between 1893 and 1895. The practice was a long-established one when Margoliouth began to decode, but when a questioner at the Bacon Society in 1937 asked him if he had worked with a knowledge of the decoding of Shakespeare, he replied that he had not known about it until that moment.

Margoliouth's deep training in classical composition was also relevant. Its concern for word order and choice of vocabulary quite often leads to a deftness with word games and puzzles. As a master of writing Greek verse, Margoliouth was excellently equipped to turn Greek words assembled from Homeric lettering into new iambic verses. He assembled them as anagrams, but while he did so another critical mind had just been uncovering anagrams at an even deeper level.

Once again, a member of Margoliouth's own college has helped me to broaden the context. Ann Jefferson, emeritus fellow in French, has alerted me to similarly misguided ingenuities by the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, Margoliouth's contemporary. In spring 1906, he had been visiting the Colosseum in Rome and had been much struck by Latin verses which he saw inscribed there on an upright stone. They were early in date and were composed, he believed, in the old Saturnian metre. It seemed to him that phonetic syllables were repeated in these lines, a clue which inclined him to look for their presence in other orally composed poems, especially Homer's and the Indian Vedas. In his house in Geneva he spent many hours searching for 'theme words' dispersed phonetically through entire lengths of text: he claimed that reading involved not just the following of a surface line, but the picking up of a secondary vertical axis present across long lengths of text. This vertical axis was even more esoteric than the vertical axis of letters on the surface of verses by Homer which Margoliouth assembled and turned into anagrams wherever the surface wording struck him as 'unnatural'. Saussure, too, believed that a deep level of meaning was attainable by applying anagrams, but unlike Margoliouth he pursued 'words under words'. Stating his belief in the '*fureur du jeu phonique*', he wrote round in excitement to many great authorities throughout Europe, who usually replied in cold disbelief. Did he perhaps write to Margoliouth in c. 1906–7, reinforcing, maybe even animating, him to engage in a hunt for buried meanings himself? I have found no evidence yet for such contact, and there may be nothing more here than a coincidence

³⁴ Cited in the entry for 'Leslie Whitaker Hunter, BA MA', in *The Slow Dusk*, Magdalen College, Oxford's online Great War memorial database: <<https://slowdusk.magd.ox.ac.uk/people/leslie-whitaker-hunter-ba-ma/>> (Accessed: 20 July 2026).

of two great minds moving in parallel in a completely misguided direction at the same time. By late April 1909, Saussure realised the entire enterprise was misguided, whereas Margoliouth remained committed to his, long after Saussure had given up and stored away his unpublished notebooks in boxes in the attic of his house.

Most of us are many-sided, even fellows of New College, some of whom have combined the study of films or the history of tarot cards with official positions in philosophy, detailed knowledge of gardening with ancient history, expertise in snooker with expertise in Old English, or a professional training in Egyptology with biochemical pharmacology. Margoliouth's many sidedness, by contrast, extended to studies which were baseless. There is a cautionary tale here about the scope of meticulous, methodical minds: he was not alone in his field in tirelessly extending his reasoning into the vain pursuit of unicorns.

James Rendel Harris, six years older than Margoliouth, was a scholar of comparable stature whose long career included years of distinction in Cambridge, Maryland, Philadelphia, and Manchester. He was a fine editor, and made even greater contributions to Syriac and other near Eastern studies by assembling major collections of manuscripts, including some from St Catherine's monastery on Sinai. Margoliouth certainly knew him, not least through the work of his own wife Jessie and in correspondence when Rendel Harris was head of the John Rylands Library. He surely knew, therefore, of his other studies from 1903 onwards, one tracing a general 'cult of twins' from ancient Egypt to the early Christian saints and apostles, another the origin of the Olympian gods in cults of plants, and above all, his contentions that a silver cup, gifted to him, had a Greek inscription very close to words ascribed to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, that other glass cups were related to the very cup used at the Last Supper and that that cup had indeed travelled to Britain and underlay the legend of the Holy Grail which he also investigated at length in 1927. Rendel Harris too was a committed Christian, a Quaker, not an evangelical, and was sustained by a profound sense of God's guidance, even in this maze of rationally pursued tommyrot.

Margoliouth's unravelling of coded meanings in verses of Greek drama and epic was the upper step of a mental escalator that had been moving in a similar direction for many years. He had postulated Hebrew behind the Wisdom of Solomon and as the language of Theocritus, and in each case he had argued remorselessly from mistaken premises: he then maintained his conclusions with unshaken obstinacy. Margoliouth considered his method validated by its ability to produce results from one apparently problematic text after another, but here, his procedure has acquired a new resonance. It resembles the output of AI when it selects a false starting point and reasons on and on down a misconceived avenue. As this sort of AI was unknown in Margoliouth's era, 'WT' is the more pertinent category, Wykehamist Intelligence, the quality of a mind, drilled at that school, which applies remorseless reasoning wherever a postulate leads, human complexity being no obstacle.

For Margoliouth, there was a further straitjacket, his biblicist faith. His claims about ciphers appealed to rare scraps of evidence in ancient Greek, which often were late in date and of little or no plausibility, but like bits of biblical evidence, their very existence as texts sufficed for him to assume their general validity: source criticism was a dangerous snare. His indefatigable assembling of examples to which to apply his method also conformed to biblicists' gathering of so-called proof texts, before, so they believed, they applied a general hypothesis. This separation between the collection of data and its selection was congenial to Baconians and their Society, but it does not survive scrutiny as a philosophy of science. 'Great wits are sure to madness near allied': Margoliouth's procedure was mad, but there was method, certainly, in his madness. It is still a warning light, ready to flash among the electronic hum of research in college.

III

Margoliouth's main work lay in Arabic studies, but similar threads in his thinking existed there too. I wish to trace them, as others have not, and then to draw them together in a final appreciation of the personality which others knew.

From the start of his professorship to its end, Margoliouth's publications and editions of unstudied Arabic papyri were major achievements, whether those in the Bodleian or the 'Oriental manuscripts' of Eton College or the John Rylands Library in Manchester. These texts posed problems, often acute, of supplementing and reading rather than emendation. Years of textual criticism in ancient Greek in the 1880s had accustomed Margoliouth to decisive judgements about whether a word had belonged in an original text and, if not, how to correct or replace it. It also instilled a wariness about possible fakes as his first reaction to the Elephantine papyri exemplified. This training did not fade in his mind. In 1925, just after his decoding of Homer and Euripides, he published a famous article arguing that pre-Islamic poetry was a post-Islamic invention.

His view here was not unparalleled, as the fine scholar Taha Hussein argued exactly the same in a book published in Cairo later in the same year. He had met Margoliouth there, and enjoyed friendly relations with him shortly before. Perhaps their minds had been moving in parallel in the same direction: a similar convergence occurred in their view that pre-Islamic Arabs had lived by values known among Homeric heroes. Taha Hussein pursued this interpretation in great detail, still worth studying by Homeric scholars, in the first part of his book whose Arabic title translates as 'Dismissing Pre-Islamic Poems' Claims to Authenticity'. His views about pre-Islamic poetry's post-Islamic origin led to active protests in Egypt, whereas Margoliouth's were received with caution in Europe. In 1926, they were decisively answered by Ernst Bräunlich, a younger professor of great distinction at Leipzig. According to Beeston, Margoliouth moderated them in later life, contrary to his usual tendency. A prime counterargument to his claim remains one he notes but does not pursue: the contention that language in the pre-Islamic poems is evidently at a slightly earlier stage than some of the Arabic encountered in the Koran. Margoliouth regarded this argument as speculative and not soundly based, but with increased study most modern specialists accept it.

Hourani well reminds us that Margoliouth was 'extremely learned, but self-taught as an Arabic and Islamic scholar, and did not have that close contact with older scholars in the field which is important in forming the judgement'.³⁵ The point needs qualification as his career advanced. By then he wrote and received letters from far and wide: he also reviewed books on an extraordinary breadth of subjects, and served with acclaim first on the Council, then as Director, then President of the Royal Asiatic Society in London, an international institution. When International Congresses of Orientalists resumed in the 1920s and '30s he attended the one in Oxford and then the next in Leiden. In the 1890s he already had an early awareness of Ignaz Goldziher's superb studies, published in German, on the traditions and the transformation of early Islam. In 1924 he recorded his debt to Fritz Krenkow 'whose acquaintance with early Arabian poetry is probably unique',³⁶ but this contact was not one with a distant maestro. Krenkow, uncle by marriage of D. H. Lawrence, had begun as an independent scholar. He taught himself Arabic when setting up a textile business in Leicester which grew to employ hundreds of people under his direction. He was also a fine searcher for Arabic manuscripts in western libraries, helped by contacts he made through the Royal Asiatic Society, no doubt where he and Margoliouth met and began a productive scholarly relationship.

Before considering Margoliouth's views about Islam, I wish to stress once again a fundamental point, one not related to this topic in memoirs and obituaries of him: from 1899 onwards, he remained an ordained Christian priest, one of a low church, evangelical persuasion.

³⁵ Hourani, *Islam*, p. 33.

³⁶ D. S. Margoliouth, *The Relations between Arabs and Israelites prior to the Rise of Islam* (London: Oxford University Press, 1924), Preface.

Christopher Tyerman, current fellow of New College, has helped me realise that at that time, the social concerns of Christian evangelicals were not those of gender, divorce, homosexuality, and so forth which are prominent in their modern profile. A central aspiration was missionary. Margoliouth's own father, Ezekiel, had been a convert from Judaism to Christianity, and had then worked with missionary zeal in London's Bethnal Green. Ezekiel was a noted preacher, a skill which his son commanded too.

I wish to emphasize a sermon which Margoliouth's appraisers overlook. He gave it on 11 February 1900 in St Aldate's Church, Oxford, and a long text of it was then published. Taking as his title 'The Failure of Islam', he remarks that the number of followers of Mohammed is steadily dwindling in Europe, and that in America, Islam is little known. However, large tracts of Asia are entirely under its sway, and in Africa it is not only dominant but shows a tendency to gain ground. Margoliouth was preaching to a congregation made up of members of the Church Missionary society which was celebrating its 75th birthday. Could Christians, he asked, win Islam's adherents over?

Islam's extension 'might be regarded without dismay', he explained, if it was merely serving as a halfway house on the road from paganism to Christianity. However, there was a problem: 'the force that should have lasted to the end of the journey is not there recruited, but broken and exhausted'. As a result people were stopping with Islam as an end in itself. A 'further terrible difficulty' is that 'it represents itself as an advance on the Christian system' and as 'a repeal of Christ's code'. Margoliouth forbore to explain that it claimed much more: it denied the central tenets of the Christian faith, from the Virgin Birth to Jesus's sonship of God, his death on the cross and his bodily resurrection.

For Margoliouth, 'the controversialist who deals with Islam has to unravel before he can weave'. He then presents the threads of its cloth in their true colours. The career of Muhammad 'represents one which has few equals in its atrocity: to suppose that God could have directly employed such a servant as that is to blaspheme'. Teachers who 'insist on the literal application of the precepts of the Koran are retrograde and fanatical; the spirit they arouse thereby is the spirit which, when let loose, turns the smiling country into howling wilderness'. Furthermore, 'Sin loses much of its venom if it be acknowledged to be sin', but Islam's teaching conveys the very opposite: when Islam 'claims to be what God has enjoined, and millions believe it, then, indeed, Satan has triumphed'. The 'manifold and irksome ceremonies that constitute part of the daily life of a Mohammedan' are of no value. Christians have to tell those who practise 'the five daily prayers, and the fasting month, and the pilgrimage to Mecca' that they are not 'the service which God desires'. Admittedly, one recent attempt at internal reform had 'had a large following in Persia': Margoliouth evidently refers here to the Babi movement and the impetus of its heirs in the 1890s. It even attracted 'some sympathy in Europe, partly because, at one time at least, it embraced in its programme the emancipation of women'. Margoliouth had by that date become an active supporter of suffragettes in Britain, a cause very dear to his wife Jessie.

If the message of the Gospel is 'that of bankruptcy before it can tell of the greater and truer riches, what must be the character of the message to those whose lives have been spent in discussing the minutiae of those childish rites . . . ? Truly it can only be the grace of God that makes the blind to see and the deaf to hear'. Within itself, Islam has 'no such remedy' based on reform. Those in it who want to make men 'better' have to read into the Koran meanings it never had; to claim authority, they are even 'compelled to claim mystic gifts and so practise imposture in order to make men true'. There is, nonetheless, a glimmer of hope on this benighted road. The true "fruits of the Spirit" are exemplified by British government and will provide conditions under which the Gospel will receive the most favourable hearing. Christians must try to substitute 'the purity of family life' for institutions within Islam 'that I do not dare to name': I assume polygamy is the main offender. They must also substitute 'reverent but loving intercourse with our Father in

heaven for puerile washings and prostrations and fastings and pilgrimages'.³⁷ Preaching boldly before missionary-minded Christians, Margoliouth may have been especially frank, but he was manifestly speaking his own mind. There is not a hint of irony let alone of the 'deep scepticism' in which Murray considered that Margoliouth's irony was rooted. He was not speaking obliquely: he was speaking out. The tenor of this sermon fits with aspects of the books on Islam he published in the next 13 years.

In some of their titles and much of their contents Margoliouth refers to Mohammedanism more often than to Islam. In 1903, he even published an article on the terms *islam* and *hanif* in the earliest Arabic sources, and proposed that *islam* entered Muhammad's vocabulary as a term already being used to characterise followers of Musaylima, another prophet in the Arabian peninsula. In Margoliouth's unusual opinion, Musaylima was already dominant in Arabia before Muhammad began to receive revelations. The word retained a sense of 'desertion', even treachery. The detailed arguments in this article were refuted within a year by Charles Lyall who rightly emphasised the religious sense of *islam/salama* as 'self-surrender' or submission, a sense that is paramount in the Koran. He concluded that the attempt to trace the sense 'to a misunderstanding of the name of a sect founded by an obscure teacher on the other side of Arabia . . . seems to me a very singular example of extravagant conjecture'.³⁸ Nonetheless the conjecture relates, I believe, to Margoliouth's favoured label for the new religion.

As Tyerman has helped me to realise, Mohammedanism was a term which enabled a non-Muslim author to present the movement as political. In one of his books at this time Margoliouth actually wrote that what Muhammad spread was 'the formation of a nation rather than the formation of a new religion'. Seen in this light, Mohammedanism was not a religion which denied the central tenets of Christianity and claimed to replace them. Instead it was a political movement, and it should be possible to convert Mohammedans because they were exactly where Margoliouth began by asserting, halfway towards Christianity. In fact, they were nothing of the sort.

In 1905, a mere five years after this sermon, he published *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam* in a widely read series entitled Heroes of the Nation. Even here, he could include at least 15 pages on medical factors which could explain Mohammed's sense of revelations from the angel Gabriel and the possibility that they were a consequence of epilepsy, an allegation with a long history. He also compared them with the recent revelations claimed by John Smith and the Mormons. Despite the word Islam in his title, there is no mistaking the underlying irony and distaste in the author's presentation of many aspects of the subject. The Mohammed who emerges is characterised by practical opportunism, frequent ruthlessness, and the advantage of force and the sword when gaining new adherents. Recognition of quieter and kinder virtues is sparse and mainly reserved for discussion of later fictions which surrounded him with them. A chapter on early 'Islam as a Secret Society' is overplayed, but at least there is an underpinning of Koranic references and an awareness of the status of tradition, or *hadith*, which owes an acknowledged debt to Goldziher and his writings.

In 1911, he went on to write *Mohammedanism* for the Home University Library of Modern Knowledge series, no doubt guided by the presence of his New College contemporary, Gilbert Murray, on the board of editors. Here, after a wide-ranging chapter on Islam's global presence, he confines himself to one chapter on 'Mohammed and the Koran'. His judgment on Mohammed is that 'Those who can express no approval of his moral qualities cannot refrain from admiring his intellectual qualities'. Mohammed displayed admirable persistence 'in the maintenance of an opinion against fierce opposition, for a number of years': in his own way Margoliouth had had to display something similar. As for Mohammed's private revelations, especially his 'miraculous transference from the Temple in Meccah' to the "Furthest place of prostration," *i.e.* the Temple

³⁷ D. S. Margoliouth, 'The Failure of Islam', *The Church Missionary Intelligencer*, new series 25 (April 1900), 241–8, at pp. 242, 244, 245, 246, 247.

³⁸ Charles J. Lyall, 'The Words "Hanīf" and "Muslim"', *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* (October 1903), 771–84, at p. 784.

of Jerusalem', an analogy is once again adduced, this time the Adventure, published in that very year, 1911, by the two Oxford ladies who claimed to have been taken back to 18th-century Versailles while visiting the Petit Trianon. The analogy attempts to subvert the revelation's divine status. Margoliouth does not practise equivalence and apply the same analogy to miraculous transferences in his own Christianity, whether the temptation in the desert, the transfiguration, or the resurrection and ascension. When he turns to discuss the Islamic state, he includes slavery, the cutting off of hands, death as the punishment for apostasy, and the use of torture: 'the present writer had an interview with another Persian governor in 1901, who was said to have cut a prisoner to pieces'.³⁹ The title *Mohammedanism* persisted in reprints, and was imposed on its eventual successor in the same series, Hamilton Gibb's masterwork in 1949, much to Gibb's disgust at its implications.

Was Margoliouth racist in his analysis, as many European authors were at the time? Here, caution is in order. He could write in passing of Persians as representing the Indo-Aryan heritage, which inclined them to emotional poetry and sentiment. He could also raise the question of whether racial considerations were relevant to Mohammed's early successes and failures. However, in 1908 he had reviewed the project of a First Universal Races Congress, an idealist initiative which surely owed something to two New College contemporaries, Gilbert Murray, the later champion of a League of Nations, and Alfred Zimmern, the champion of a liberal commonwealth rather than an illiberal empire. Margoliouth wrote in his review that 'the racial division is one of great difficulty when any practical application is desirable'.⁴⁰ When he spoke at the second Race Congress in 1911, he was similarly cautious. In his Mohammed books, he pauses to wonder whether racial or climatic considerations might be relevant to what happened in Arabia, but he is more inclined to a climatic explanation, one phrased in terms of what he calls the 'Heat Belt'. He argues that intense heat is a disincentive to prolonged intellectual activity, a view with which current college fellows may sympathise in 21st-century summers, especially in the absence of the chill which used to sanctify the basement of the college library but was lost when parts of its floor were re-laid. Margoliouth reiterated the role of a heat belt in subsequent writings, but it is a far from convincing element with which to explain the distribution of Islamic thought.

As Margoliouth wrote so many book reviews, so many entries for the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, and so many articles on related subjects, I am wary of reducing his understanding of Islam too simplistically in any one decade. However, two further books which appeared in 1907 are consistent with the infrastructure of his first book on Mohammed. One is his translation of a volume of Jurjī Zaydān's massive *History of Islamic Civilization*: it was volume four on the Umayyads and 'Abbāsids. Margoliouth had met and become friendly with Jurjī, an intellectual from Lebanon who had moved to Cairo and had drawn severe criticism from Muslim leaders for presenting the expansion and rule of Islam in the early centuries as a history of worldly behaviour and values rather than religious motivation and commitment. That view, I suggest, had especially appealed to Margoliouth, and inclined him to select the book for translation.

In 1907 he also published for general readers a book on *Cairo, Jerusalem & Damascus*. He explained that it was commissioned as a text to accompany the watercolours of W. S. Tyrwhitt, and that 'The chance of being associated at any time in his life with the Fine Arts constituted a temptation he was unable to resist'.⁴¹ He calls himself an 'occasional visitor' to these cities, but a book by him is, as ever, odd, most patently in its section on Damascus. In New College's first Margoliouth Memorial Lecture, in May 2026, Professor Eugene Rogan, linked to New College by marriage to a former JRF, explained lucidly how Margoliouth's book gave next to no space to the 'rebuilt Damascus' of the years around 1900, but focused instead on textual accounts of the city's glories in a much earlier age: Margoliouth concluded his account with Tamurlane's sacking of the

³⁹ D. S. Margoliouth, *Mohammedanism* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1911), pp. 60, 61, 103.

⁴⁰ D. S. Margoliouth, 'The First Universal Races Congress', *The Sociological Review* 4 (1911) 216–31, at p. 219.

⁴¹ D. S. Margoliouth, *Cairo, Jerusalem & Damascus: Three Chief Cities of the Egyptian Sultans* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1907), p. ix.

city in the early 1400s. Once, however, he remarks that relations between Muslims and Christians have probably improved, 'yet the events of 1860 showed that the anti-Christian feeling was deep, and that among certain portions of the Moslem population it might still be roused'.⁴² At the end of the book he publishes without further comment a translation of 'The Massacre of 1860' from a text he presents as *The Unveiling of the Troubles of Syria*. As Rogan explained, the text had been published anonymously in 1895, but its author later became known, Shahin Makarios, a controversial figure who also wrote on freemasonry. When he published his account, the roles of Muslims and Christians in the massacres had long become contentious, for reasons Rogan well brought out, arguing that Makarios's account contained considerable exaggerations in the Christians' favour, including an inflated number of Christian houses which had been destroyed. Although Margoliouth probably translated and printed it trustingly, it was a version which complemented his underlying view about Islam.

Seven years later, in 1914, he published his Hibbert lectures, given in London the year before, under the title *The Early Development of Mohammedanism*. The text is distinguished by its increasing appeal to previously unpublished Arabic sources, and a range which is indeed impressive. A few flourishes of classical learning appear implausibly nonetheless, especially the claim that the woman who unravels her spinning in the Koran's Sura 16:92 owes a distant and probably unrecognised debt to Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey*, and that the superiority of Satan's creation from fire to Adam's creation from clay owes a distant debt to Aristotle's hierarchy of the elements in his *Metaphysics*. A chapter on 'Asceticism Leading to Pantheism' embarks on new and important topics, especially Sufism and its origins. The beginnings of mysticism outside the Koran involve Margoliouth in brief discussion of al-Hallāj, put to death for controversial reasons after his trial in Baghdad in 922. Here, he mentions that a treatise, the *Tawāṣīn*, largely by Hallāj himself, has recently been published, though not translated. He characterises it as 'very largely infantile', composed of 'infantile jingles': the entry in his index records 'Hallāj (†922), mystic, author of an infantile work'.⁴³ In his book's preface he refers to his debt to 'M. Massignon's interesting edition of a work by Hallāj',⁴⁴ a remark which opens a fascinating vista. It was Louis Massignon who had just published the Arabic text of the *Tawāṣīn*, the work in question. He and Margoliouth had corresponded, and their letters would be well worth trying to trace. It is fascinating to imagine that they might even have met, though the chronology of their travels may limit that possibility. From different standpoints, both of them were profound Christians, but whereas Margoliouth, an evangelical, had an underlying faith in a mission to convert Muslims, Massignon, a French Catholic, had a more complex view. He considered that it was for him not just to pray *with* Muslims, but also to pray *for* them. He considered that like the mystic Hallāj, at least in his own view of him, he himself could take on the burden of being a 'substitute' recognised by God, someone who would assume the sins of the world and work to atone for them. The roots of this belief lay in French writings of the 1890s, especially those characterised as decadent.

Unlike Margoliouth, Massignon believed that he had personally encountered God, the Divine Stranger, one night in 1908 while onboard a boat down the river Tigris. It was a life-changing experience to which he often adverted in intense conversation: I enjoy imagining Margoliouth's reception of one such disquisition if they had ever encountered each other face to face. Each of them was capable of brilliant reading and editing of unpublished Arabic manuscripts. As top scholars they were followed in later decades by the great Hamilton Gibb. He too was a profoundly committed Christian, one shaped in youth by his Scottish Presbyterian background. A comparative study of the relations between these three scholars' views of Islam and their own Christianity, differing in each case, would be well worth attempting. Unlike Margoliouth and

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 236.

⁴³ D. S. Margoliouth, *The Early Development of Mohammedanism: Lectures Delivered in the University of London May and June 1913* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1914), pp. 182, 183, 261.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. vi.

Massignon, Gibb may seem to have separated his profound Christian upbringing from his empathetic study of Islam, especially in its Sunni form. However, in a fine obituary, his close Oxford colleague, Albert Hourani, has emphasized Gibb's support for a distinction derived from the Kantian philosophy which he had absorbed as a young man in Edinburgh. 'Pure religious faith' was the religion of reason which was already at work in individuals and would eventually lead to a universal religion and ethical harmony. Meanwhile, most people would live with 'ecclesiastical faith' derived from pure faith and most solid when based on scripture as well as a tradition. Gibb could therefore regard the Islamic community and its evolving intellectual and spiritual beliefs, based on texts and tradition, as a stage towards the eventual realisation of a single 'religion of reason'.⁴⁵ As a result he avoided Margoliouth's irony and polemical evangelism, and distanced himself from Massignon's intensely personal Catholicism and faith in 'substitution'.

Margoliouth lived a long life, travelling and reading ever more widely. His evangelical faith remained undented, but it is not sufficiently noted that his writing on Islam changed its tone and scope, as did his remarks on it in public settings. I will illustrate the change and consider reasons for it.

A record survives of an interview he gave in December 1916 while in Qadian, then in India, to give a public lecture. His Muslim questioner, half Margoliouth's age, elicits from him his admiration of Ibn Khaldun as a great philosopher of history, and Ibn Miskawaih as a historian of events. Margoliouth is then cautious when told how Islam is based on divine events and their eye-witnesses: he merely replies 'if there is a witness to an event there is no doubt about its validity'. In turn he asks his young questioner if he thinks 'the miracle of *Shaq-ul-Qamar* [the splitting of the moon]' in the Koran could recur or even the miracle of the Koran itself, but he does not press the question and passes no negative comment on any aspect of Islam itself. The occasion called for courtesy and restraint.⁴⁶ His clearly presented lectures of 1921 to the British Academy, published in 1924 as *The Relations between Arabs and Israelites prior to the Rise of Islam*, were also discreet. He argued first that the Israelites came from the Arabian peninsula, a view he backed with detailed arguments about words in Hebrew and in early Arabic. Then, 'after the lapse of at the least two thousand years', the Israelites, or Jews, he argued, brought back into Arabia so much which emerged in Islam.⁴⁷ The elements which coalesced into Islam have remained a much-disputed subject, but Margoliouth's stress on the Jewish inheritance makes it regrettable that he never lived to read the broadly similar, but paradoxical, contentions of Cook and Crone in 1977.⁴⁸ His response to their claims for what they called Hagarism would be worth having.

Though Arabic poetry, a crucial source for pre-Islamic Arabia, was excluded by Margoliouth's view that it was all later in date, he laid justified stress on the value of inscriptions in south Arabia and concluded with fine pages on their value as immediate historical evidence. A year later, in 1925, he published a detailed study of two of them from unedited squeezes which, according to the expert Beeston, 'remains more plausible than some subsequent rival attempts'.⁴⁹ As for Muhammed, he raised the matter of revelations to him and gave yet another modern analogy, but his conclusion had none of the stridency of his sermon in 1900 or his book of 1905. The Jews' attitude to him, he remarked, was similar to that of C. M. Doughty, the famous traveller in the Arabian desert. 'He might have been prepared to call Socrates a prophet of God, but nothing would induce him to bestow that title on the founder of Islam'.⁵⁰ Margoliouth then leaves the

⁴⁵ Albert Hourani, 'Sir Hamilton Gibb 1895–1971', *Proceedings of the British Academy: Volume LVIII: 1972* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 493–523, at pp. 508–9.

⁴⁶ Cited by Awwab Saad Hayat, 'Coming from every distant track: David Samuel Margoliouth, English orientalist visits Qadian', *Al Hakam* (2 April 2021): <www.alhakam.org/coming-from-every-distant-track-david-samuel-margoliouth-english-orientalist-visits-qadian> (Accessed: 20 July 2026).

⁴⁷ Margoliouth, *The Relations*, p. 82.

⁴⁸ Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

⁴⁹ Beeston, 'Margoliouth, David Samuel', *ODNB*.

⁵⁰ Margoliouth, *The Relations*, p. 62.

matter open with a touch of irony: 'whether this implies a higher or lower level of intelligence than that of the other Arabs must be left to the individual judgement to decide'.

His book in 1905 had been much more outspoken. A thinker's views on Islam can indeed develop and change over a long lifetime: Tolstoy, Margoliouth's older contemporary, began with a very hostile view, but by 1909 was expressing a much more favourable one. In his case, his definition of Christianity had shifted, and his new Tolstoyan view of it could readily accommodate most of Islam's values and its rejection of the main items of Christian theology. Margoliouth's evangelical Christianity never wavered, but even so he continued to temper his written views of Islam. He never refers to the important studies of Tor Andrae in the early 1930s, which related aspects of Muhammad's message to themes attested among east Christian ascetics rather than Jews. Margoliouth would have been most interested by this work, if he read it, as it brought early Islam and Christianity into a closer relation. His own revised view emerges most clearly in a book passed over by most of his critics. It was entitled *Mohammed*, and was published in 1939 in a 'What Did They Teach?' series put out by Blackies in London and Scotland. It is far the best of his accessible works addressed to a wider audience. It contains notable chapters on 'The Spiritual World', on 'Cosmogony and Anthropology', and also on 'Ethics' in which Mohammed's Koran is praised for a message of moderation. The final chapter on 'Pre-Islamic History' is clear, though still without any use of poetry as a main source. It is the book on Islam by which to remember him, written within a year or two of his retirement from the Laudian professorship. The former irony has gone, and there are no belittling modern analogies. Since 1905, Margoliouth's views had been tempered, I suspect, by his many travels, especially to India where he lectured on a living Islamic society, and had been received with acclaim. He had continued to read and keep up with new research, and had attended to his own critics, no doubt including Gibb, his young successor. He was also potentially a historian, among all his linguistic theorising and bizarre belief in hidden codes and meanings. Even without any use of poetry, his specialised articles on pre-Islamic Arabia show a range and openness which any historian would be proud to command. He was well aware of the value of early south-Arabian inscriptions. He combined awareness of this material with a sense that social structures and the absence of formal state-formation were essential for understanding what Muhammad eventually brought. He drew freely and ably on anthropological studies by Robertson Smith and their contentions for the early Semitic world in order to fill out the textual gap which his rejection of pre-Islamic poetry had opened.

In 1907–8, Margoliouth was in Istanbul, and witnessed the local reactions to the Ottomans' publication of the first-ever constitution. He was at once aware of the value of his eye-witness testimony, and wrote it up, shaped by historical understanding. Subsequently, he published a lucid article on Ottoman diplomacy in the 18th century. His sermon, preached in New College Chapel in 1920, 'The Sword of the Spirit', is remarkable for its wide range of historical examples and comparisons, from Joan of Arc to the Battle of Lepanto. In the early 1920s he had not just been finalising his bizarre views on chronograms hidden in Euripides and codes in Homer: he had set about translating Tanukhi's *Table-Talk of a Mesopotamian Judge*. As he well realised, these memoirs are full of interest, not so much about events and battles as about social practices, tastes, and fashions. They are invaluable for anyone wanting to catch the scale of slavery in well-off households in Baghdad, the patronage of gardens, and even the huge scale of cultivation of saffron crocuses: large quantities of saffron were being used for colouring fountains or fabrics at parties given by the very rich, but modern growers attest that every kilogram of saffron requires the stigmas of at least 150,000 saffron crocus flowers.

The *Table-Talk* is also a fascinating source for the role of memorisation in contemporary Islamic society, especially in anecdotes passed on to Tanukhi by his father. We hear about Tanukhi's own ability to learn 1,200 lines of poetry in a night, and also about a teacher-to-be who withdrew to Basra and learned the entire Koran by heart in six months. Margoliouth rendered into a range of rhythmical English metres many of the Arabic poems the text contained, a task which was grounded in his years of classical verse-composition and attention to metrical variety. He went

on to translate the *Book of Leaves* by as-Suli, which is also illuminating about taste in well-off society and the social background which it assumes. Margoliouth's choice of these works attests his evident interest in social history, and was accompanied by his translation of Ibn Miskawayh's fascinating *Tajārīb al-umam* ('The Experiences of the Nations'), a text still not fully exploited for its content and outlook. In 1929, indeed, Margoliouth was lecturing in Calcutta on Islamic historians: the published text of his lectures reflects his appreciation of these authors, ones he categorises as sceptical and invaluable for their information about social practices and contemporaries. I wish that Margoliouth had gone on to write a fuller history of the manners, even morals, of the later Abbasid and early Buyid period in Baghdad, topics which evidently had begun to appeal to him.

I would not wish, therefore, to leave a one-sided impression of him as rather supercilious, a dogmatic textual critic, and a bigoted evangelical with missionary aspirations. On the one hand, as Gilbert Murray eloquently recalled, 'his irony, so alarming to strangers, came it would seem from the depths of his nature'. It was indeed 'part of a profound scepticism', but this scepticism was not all-embracing relativism. Underneath it was the secure yardstick of his firm Christian faith. On the other hand, as Murray insists, 'what really stirred him was pity for human suffering'. His marriage in 1896 to Jessie had brought him into close contact with the cause of Suffragettes and disadvantaged women. By 1910, he was serving on the governing body of Oxford's Warneford Hospital for Mental Diseases, and became chairman. This engagement did not arise from an awareness of any personal mental instability: his wife's family were already involved in the hospital's administration. In 1914, as war broke out, Margoliouth donated part of his salary to the hospital, presumably in anticipation of the traumas which the war would cause. It was of a piece with his other public and practical initiatives in wartime and its aftermath, including vigorous support for 'Assyrian' Christians when persecuted in Mesopotamia and Armenian Christians when persecuted by Turks, causes with which his wife Jessie also was associated. By the mid-1930s, he was expressing intense public concern for the persecution of Jews in Hitler's Germany, a horror which 'haunted him', says Murray, 'like a passion'. Pity was the Christian obverse of the irony he professed.

Small, but telling, evidence survives in the New College archives, in a letter from 20 May 1936, in which he writes to his colleague Christopher Cox, announcing that he will be driving in from his home on Boars Hill to arrive at 7 pm on Sunday 'to talk about Ahmedali. I have a very high opinion both of his scholarship and industry, and am anxious to help him. I had no idea that he was involving himself in financial difficulties', he adds, 'till he told me about them a week or so ago'.⁵¹ New College archives contain evidence that Abid Ahmedali, a Muslim, had been admitted from Aligarh College in Uttar Pradesh, and was in the second year of a DPhil in Arabic: Christopher Cox was overseeing him. At the time Margoliouth was 77 years old, widowed, but not self-absorbed. By 30 May he had written a testimonial for Ahmedali to help him, one which Ahmedali described in a further letter to Cox as 'very good'.⁵²

In the SCR of that year, 1935–6, his younger contemporaries included two remarkable college lecturers, C. S. Lewis and Isaiah Berlin. I regret that I never thought to ask Isaiah what his sharp eye had made of Margoliouth, as his anecdotes about others, especially Alfred Zimmern and his wife, were colourful. As for Lewis, despite his differences with evangelicalism, he would have found much to applaud in Margoliouth's Christian commitment and sense of mission, if he ever penetrated the older man's social defences. I suspect that by then Margoliouth seemed a detached, dry-minded dinosaur from an earlier age, but behind the gaunt and forbidding exterior there remained a kind and philanthropically active heart. A year and a half later, esteem for him is evident in the menu and placement for the college's 'Complimentary Dinner to Dr. D. S. Margoliouth', held on 12 January 1938, at which 'The Warden will propose and Dr. Gilbert Murray will support the toast of DR. MARGOLIOUTH Dr. Margoliouth will reply'.⁵³ He was no longer entitled

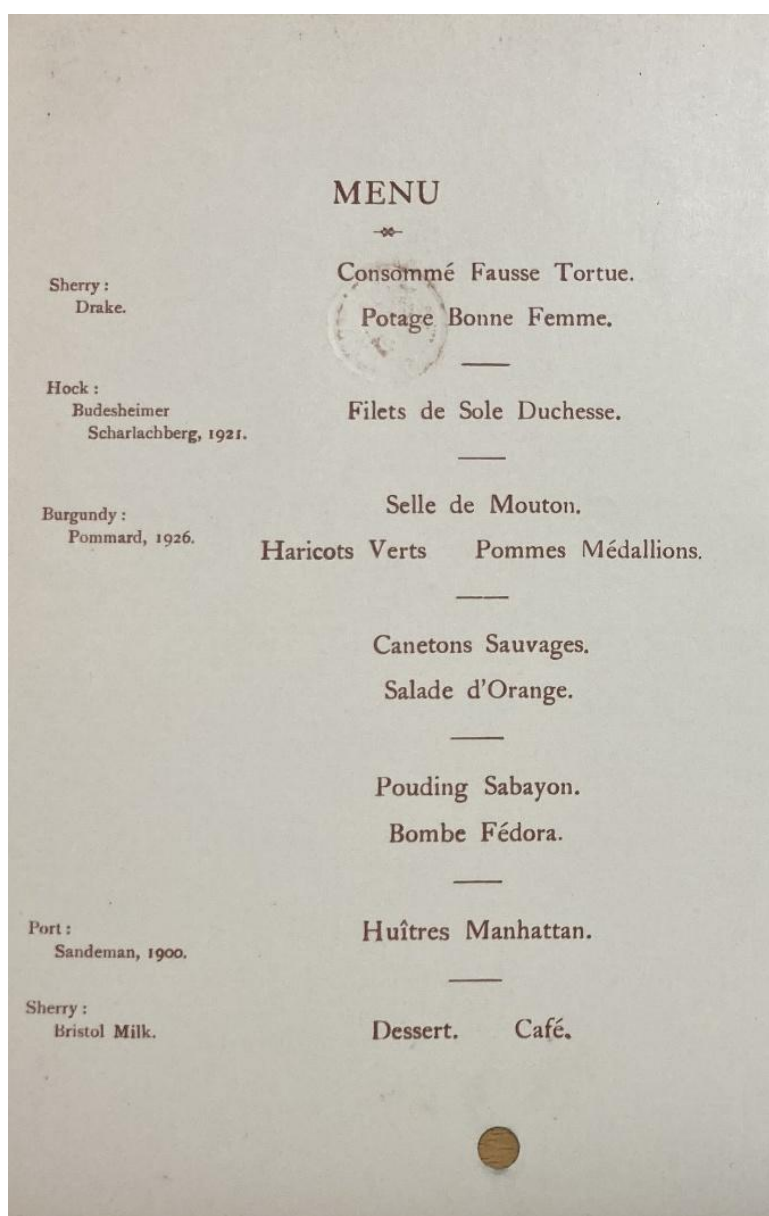
⁵¹ New College Archives, Oxford, NCA PA/COX/2/10/3/80.

⁵² Letter from Abid Ahmedali to Christopher Cox (30 May 1936), NCA PA/COX/2/1/2/74.

⁵³ NCA BCF/154.

'Professor' as three months had passed since his retirement from the Laudian chair, the occasion which the dinner was marking after a delay due to Margoliouth's health.

I reproduce the menu first, noting the opening and concluding servings of sherry, and the six courses which close with 'Pouding Sabayon' (surely our zabaglione) and oysters, now mercifully banned from the college's St Thomas Day dinners after the bouts of severe sickness they have caused in many of the guests. I also reproduce the seating plan for this marathon, noting the presence of elderly Alfred Zimmern, the fine philosophic mind of Professor Price, the historian Stuart Ogg, and the classical Mods tutor and future domestic Bursar, ever inclined to austerity, Eric Yorke. I also note the evidence of collegiality and personal friendship. In the best traditions of the New College SCR, they had not been undermined by radical academic differences. G. R. Driver was in attendance, though he was the son of S. R. Driver whose biblical criticism had been so at odds with Margoliouth's: he went on to publish a fine edition of Aramaic papyri from Egypt, including those from Elephantine which Margoliouth had wrongly proposed to be fakes. On Margoliouth's right sat Gilbert Murray, who can only have regarded Margoliouth's Euripidean chronograms with utter disbelief, and who had chosen, rightly, to disregard as an aberration his work on Homer's date and life, the antithesis of everything Murray had written on that subject over many years.



DR. GILBERT MURRAY

DR. MARGOLIOUTH

WARDEN

SUBWARDEN

Warden of Winchester

Sir E. Denison Ross

MR. MATHESON

Mr. G. R. Driver

PROF. PRICE

PROF. TOWNSEND

MR. WALDEN

Mr. H. E. Bowman

SIR ALFRED ZIMMERN

Dr. A. H. Gardiner

Sir Edward Maclagan

DR. POOLE

Mr. H. E. Dale

PROF. JOACHIM

MR. JENKINS

Prof. de Zulueta

MR. WICKHAM LEGG

Dr. R. Campbell Thompson

MR. JOSEPH

Sir Edgar Bonham Carter

PROF. TITCHMARSH

MR. YORKE

Mr. C. N. Seddon

MR. SMITH

PROF. PLASKETT

Sir George Robertson

BISHOP OF GLOUCESTER

PROF. LEATHES

MR. PHELPS BROWN

Prof. E. H. Johnston

Mr. E. A. A. Joseph

Mr. G. Montagu Harris

DR. CREED

MR. OGG

Rev. Dr. Danby

JUNIOR BURSAR

SENIOR BURSAR

Menu and seating plan for the 'Complimentary Dinner to Dr. D. S. Margoliouth' (12 January 1938)
New College Archives, Oxford, NCA BCF/154 © Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of New College, Oxford

I doubt if Margoliouth's cat was present, let alone on the table for the Filets de Sole Duchesse. I will take leave of Margoliouth with the concluding words of Murray's obituary two years later:

He was remarkable not merely for learning; he was one who "kept himself unspotted of the world"; he was a preacher of curious dignity and eloquence; a man of warm affections, a champion of the oppressed. His death will be felt not merely by his comrades and colleagues in England; many persons quite unknown to us in remote villages in Mesopotamia and Egypt, in India and among the camps of the Assyrian exiles, will feel unprotected and grieve over the loss of a friend.⁵⁴

Those remote villagers and encamped exiles, I infer, were Christians.

Robin Lane Fox
Emeritus Fellow
New College, Oxford

⁵⁴ Murray, 'David Samuel Margoliouth', 397.