



PETER MALCOLM HOLT

Peter Malcolm Holt

1918–2006

P. M. HOLT, who died 2 November 2006, was an historian of the Sudan, of the Middle East more widely, and of the development of Arabic Studies in early modern England. He was elected FBA in 1975.

Holt was born on 28 November 1918 at Leigh in Lancashire, his father a Unitarian minister who had been born in 1851 and tutored by the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell's husband, William. Following his father's death, when he was still only nine, Holt moved to the Buckinghamshire village of Ickford with his mother and half-sister, who were both schoolteachers. After attending the local village school, he went to Lord Williams's Grammar School at nearby Thame, and then read History at University College, Oxford from 1937 to 1940.

Having obtained a Diploma of Education (1941), he joined the Education Department of the Government of the Sudan, where he worked as a secondary school teacher and inspector. Between 1952 and 1955 he was Government Archivist and a part-time lecturer at the University College of Khartoum.

It was during his service in the Sudan in 1953 that he married Nancy Mawle, a marriage that lasted until her death late in 2005 and produced two children, Andrew and Harriett. The importance of Nancy in his life was obvious to those who knew him, and her death left him, as he put it, 'like a wagon without a wheel'. His friends and colleagues were not at all surprised that his own death should have followed so soon after hers.

Holt's time in the Sudan was a formative one for him. It was there that he acquired his knowledge of Arabic, one of only half a dozen officials to pass the Sudan Government Advanced Standard Arabic Examination in the ten years after the Second World War. He also acquired a respectful

appreciation of the country and its people. One of his pupils was the future President (1969–85), Colonel Ja'far al-Numayri (Nimeiri), whom he remembered—it is not clear with how much advantage of hindsight—as not among the brightest.

In the year before the Sudan became independent in 1956 he was appointed as a Lecturer in the History Department of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), where his Head of Department was Bernard Lewis. Holt became Reader in the History of the Near and Middle East in 1960, Professor of Arab History in 1964, and succeeded Lewis as Professor of the History of the Near and Middle East in 1975. He retired from SOAS in 1982 and was made an Honorary Fellow in 1985. He was awarded the D.Litt. of the University of Oxford in 1969 (having obtained a B.Litt. in 1952), and in 1980 the Gold Medal of Science, Letters and Arts of the Republic of the Sudan.

While in the Sudan Holt worked on the archives left by the Mahdist state that had ruled there between 1881 and 1898. The Mahdi, Muhammad Ahmad (d. 1885), and his successor, the Khalifa (Caliph) 'Abdallahi (1885–98), exchanged copious correspondence with their governors and military commanders, and that correspondence fell into the hands of the Anglo-Egyptian force that gradually reduced the Mahdist territories between 1896 and 1898. Eventually the surviving documents came to be lodged in the Government Archives in Khartoum, where Holt studied them between 1951 and 1955. They formed the chief source for his Oxford D.Phil. thesis (1954), and led to his first book, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan* (Oxford, 1958; 2nd edn. 1970).

Holt noted that the archives were so extensive that, given the time available to him, he could not hope to make full use of them; his book, therefore, he regarded as 'a preliminary historical study'. There had been earlier studies of the Mahdist movement, but those had relied mainly on British government records and were chiefly concerned with its significance for British imperial and diplomatic history. Holt, in contrast, explicitly proclaimed his concern to set the movement in its Sudanese and Islamic context and to bring out its intrinsic interest.

Three years after his book on the Mahdist state, Holt published the first edition of his *A Modern History of the Sudan* (London, 1961), a book that has undergone several subsequent expansions and revisions (latterly with the collaboration of M. W. Daly), the fourth edition appearing as *A History of the Sudan from the Coming of Islam to the Present Day* (London, 1988). The latest edition, the fifth, appeared in 2000. Aimed at

a broader, less specialised readership than the work on the Mahdist state, this has remained the standard introduction to the Sudan and its history.

Earlier editions of the work began, after a short introduction on the Funj sultanate,¹ with the Ottoman–Egyptian conquest of what was to become the state of the Sudan under Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha, starting in 1820. In subsequent editions, however, the discussion of the pre-nineteenth-century period was significantly expanded, a fact reflected in the changed title. Holt devoted more space to the formation of a Sudanese identity based on both Arab and African influences and the spread of Islam in the Sudan from the seventh to the eighteenth centuries. That provided the basis, he stressed, for the Sudan that was to emerge in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The modern republic of the Sudan is not merely the result of the Egyptian and British imperial ambitions and policies.

Articles investigating aspects of the earlier period of Sudanese history represent part of Holt’s scholarly output during the 1960s. Even before the publication of the first edition of the *History of the Sudan*, however, his writings indicated a new direction—Egypt and the other Arab lands in the period between the Ottoman conquest and the coming of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798. At the time this was a relatively little studied area of Middle Eastern History. Egypt during this period was a province of the Ottoman empire, and it was the imperial power itself that attracted most scholarly attention—along with the contemporary ‘gunpowder empires’ of the Safavids in Iran and the Moghuls in India. In the early 1960s there was a tendency to see the Arab lands during this period as stagnating under the domination of Turks and Circassians, before they were reinvigorated by the intervention of the West in the nineteenth century. Holt had proclaimed his disagreement with that approach in his writings on the Sudan, where he had emphasised the importance not merely of the indigenous tradition but also of movements of renewal, especially in the area of religion, that predated the process of modernisation initiated by the invasion of Muhammad ‘Ali. Equally, Holt proposed that traditional political, social and mental patterns survived the process of westernisation and were reasserting themselves in what he called the ‘post-liberal age’ of the latter half of the twentieth century.

¹ The Funj sultanate, with its capital at Sennar on the Blue Nile, ruled between the early sixteenth and the mid-eighteenth centuries a more extensive area of what is now the republic of the Sudan than any other dynasty before the invasion of Muhammad ‘Ali in 1820. The Funj were a people of African origin who had accepted Islam.

A series of his articles on the history of Egypt in the period between the Ottoman and Napoleonic conquests appeared in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* between 1959 and 1963, dealing with topics that had hardly been treated academically previously. Holt, indeed, referred to the period as a 'dark age' in modern Near Eastern History, alluding to the lack of academic scholarship upon it rather than to the quantity of evidence, for sources are relatively abundant both in Arabic and in Ottoman Turkish. In 1966 his research on this period was summarised (and extended to the post-First World War settlement) in his book *Egypt and the Fertile Crescent, 1516–1922: a Political History* (London, 1966).

In the decade or so following his appointment to SOAS, Holt had produced a substantial body of original work on areas of history where little had been done previously. He had also edited (jointly with Bernard Lewis) the substantial volume (519 pp.) *Historians of the Middle East* (Oxford, 1962), which was the fruit of a conference held at SOAS in 1958. Half a century ago this was an important step in the development of Middle Eastern historical studies and it remains an important resource. With the conferral of the personal chair of Arab History in 1964, and the appearance of another edited volume, *Political and Social Change in Modern Egypt. Historical Studies from the Ottoman Conquest to the United Arab Republic* (London, 1968), it may appear that his research, his output and the progress of his career were, to say the least, satisfactory. However, the latter half of the 1960s was for him a rather trying time. The main trouble was his role as the working editor of the *Cambridge History of Islam (CHI)*, a project that occupied almost the entire 1960s.

Holt was the most involved of the three editors of *CHI* (his fellow editors were Bernard Lewis and Ann K. S. Lambton) in planning and bringing the project to fruition, so much so that at one time Cambridge University Press proposed that his name alone should appear on the full title page. Holt rejected that proposal. The work clearly weighed heavily upon him. He felt that it adversely affected the amount and quality of his own research and teaching, and twice he asked to be relieved of his editorial role, but each time was talked out of it. The correction of the first set of proofs was especially onerous for him and eventually it was agreed that the Press would employ a professional proofreader to take care of the second proofs.

This arrangement proved far from satisfactory, and tensions between the editors and the Press led Holt and his fellow editors to insist that the published volumes should include a statement to the effect that the editors

were only responsible for corrections made to the first proofs, a statement that is in fact included in the published volumes that appeared at the end of 1970. The publication coincided with Holt's period in hospital and recuperation from a serious car crash, and he did not attend a reception held in Cambridge in early 1971 to celebrate the appearance of the work.

The *Cambridge History of Islam* received mixed reviews but perhaps best known is the attack upon it by Edward Said in an article in the *New York Times Book Review* (31 October 1976) and again in his *Orientalism* (1978). The gist of Said's comments was that an innocent reader would quickly form the view that Islamic history was no more than a constant succession of battles, the rise and fall of dynasties, interspersed with invasions and conquests by outsiders; that Islam as a religion is largely absent; and that the cultural achievements of the Muslims are presented only in the final part of the second volume.

One might object that the work was never intended to be read from beginning to end and that it was conceived as a work of reference. It is certainly true, nevertheless, that the narrative of political history dominates and that, while some sections remain useful, it can hardly be described as an enjoyable read or as exemplifying the best historiography at the time it was published. Holt himself thought the finished work, which at one stage he had had the idea of calling *The Cambridge History of the Islamic Peoples*, was uneven in quality. It is probably fair to say that as a whole it has not stood the test of time as successfully as many of his own writings.

With the *Cambridge History* finished, Holt extended his research back to the history of the Arab lands in the time of the Crusades for his next phase of work. The Arabic sources for the Crusades had been quite extensively used, often in translation, by previous historians, but again Holt identified an area that, until then, had been little worked on: the first half-century or so of the period of independent Mamluk rule in Syria and Egypt (1250–1516). That was the time when the early Mamluk sultans reduced and eventually eliminated (in 1293) the Frankish presence in Syria, mainly as a by-product of the pressures produced by the Mongol conquests in the eastern areas of the Islamic world.

Holt's most substantial contributions in this field appeared after his retirement from SOAS. A translation from the Arabic of the memoirs of the ruler of Hamah in Syria, Abu 'l-Fida, in 1983 (*The Memoirs of a Syrian Prince: Abu 'l-Fida, Sultan of Hamah*: Wiesbaden, 1983), was followed by *The Age of the Crusades: the Near East from the 11th Century to 1517* (London, 1986) and *Early Mamluk Diplomacy (1260–1290)*:

Treaties of Baybars and Qalawun with Christian Rulers (Leiden, 1995). He also translated from the German Peter Thorau's 1987 life of the real founder of the Mamluk sultanate, Baybars (*The Lion of Egypt*; London, 1991) and, from the French, Claude Cahen's 1988 work on Anatolia before the Ottomans (*The Formation of Turkey: the Seljukid Sultanate of Rum*; London, 2001).

While the main body of his academic research occupied three, approximately successive, phases (the Sudan, Egypt under Ottoman rule, and the early Mamluk sultanate in Egypt and Syria), the development of Arabic studies in seventeenth-century England remained an abiding interest. It had begun with a thesis on Edward Pococke (1604–91), the first holder of the Laudian Chair of Arabic in Oxford, which he submitted for his B.Litt. degree in 1952. One of his earliest articles for the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, in 1958, was 'The study of Arabic historians in seventeenth-century England', and his contribution to the *Historians of the Middle East* volume concerned the treatment of Arab history by Prideaux, Ockley and Sale. His inaugural lecture at SOAS in 1964 upon his installation as Professor of Arab History, 'The study of modern Arab history', also began with the work of his early predecessors in the field (it was published by SOAS under the same title in 1965), and in 1972 he published a study of Henry Stubbe (*A Seventeenth-Century Defender of Islam. Henry Stubbe (1632–76) and his Book*; London, 1972). Holt regarded Pococke as something of an alter ego.

In 1978 Holt had joined the British Academy's Oriental Documents Committee whose task was to bring to publication material in public archives, including that relating to the Middle East and Africa. In 1988 he took the initiative in proposing a change of direction, which the Academy approved, and he accepted the Chairmanship of a new Oriental and African Archives Committee which had as its object 'the preparation for publication of coherent bodies of materials concerning the British presence in the Near East and Africa'. The Committee sponsored work in non-governmental archival collections, concentrating on the University of Durham's Sudan archive, which consists chiefly of the papers of British officials of the Sudan Government during the Condominium (1899–1955), and the Private Papers Collection at St Antony's College, Oxford, containing the papers of persons with a Middle Eastern connection from the early nineteenth century onwards. Holt was an active and conscientious chairman. He had initially proposed a five-year pilot project, and he was greatly disappointed when the Academy decided not to continue the project beyond 1993. Between 1992 and 1997 five volumes

in the series were published by the Academy, four of them concerned with the Sudan, and one with Egypt.

Peter Holt was respected and liked for his integrity, his loyalty to the institutions with which he was attached, and his support for students and colleagues. He supervised a number of Ph.D. students, including some from the Middle East who have gone on to forge significant academic careers of their own, notably Professors Adnan Bakhit and Abdul-Karim Rafeq. While not naturally gregarious, he related well to his colleagues who recognised in him a dedicated scholar and teacher and a reliable administrator. Of small build and not the most voluble of men, he nevertheless was prepared to speak out strongly on matters of principle, especially when he felt that something was deleterious to what he saw as the proper purpose of university life.

His most notable characteristic as a scholar was his ability to open up relatively under-studied fields and to present the analysis of, mainly, political history in a clear and unaffected style. The history of the Mamluks has become one of the most lively areas of current research in pre-modern Arab history (a development indicated especially by the inauguration of the annual *Mamluk Studies Review*, Chicago, in 1997), and the Islamic lands in the time of the Crusades have also become the focus of much current interest. Carole Hillenbrand's volume, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives* (London, 1999), probably best illustrates that. Contemporary tensions between some Muslims and the West go far, of course, to explain that latter development, but Holt's work on the Crusades largely predated them and arose from more purely academic concerns. His work, in all of the areas he researched, is likely to remain of value for many years to come.

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