



DAVID SAMUEL MARGOLIOUTH

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1858-1940

IT has been truly said of D. S. Margoliouth that at the time of his death he had among the Islamic peoples of the East, and indeed among Oriental scholars in Europe 'an almost legendary reputation'. There was something about him unlimited, unpredictable. Even as an undergraduate his contemporaries regarded him with a sort of stupefaction. It was intelligible, though unusual, that a Winchester Scholar should win the Hertford and Ireland in his first year and proceed to sweep up the other classical prizes; but when he went on to take the Pusey and Ellerton Hebrew Scholarship, the Houghton Syriac Prize, the Boden Sanskrit Scholarship, he ceased to be quite human. One was reminded of the phrase '*hoc τέρας*', used by Cicero after dining with Julius Caesar.

The impression was deepened by his exotic and vivid appearance—*Questo bel animal feroce*, as an Italian lady described him—and his deep bell-like voice. Indeed, though educated in the blamelessly British tradition of Winchester and New College, and quite un-Jewish in appearance, he bore about him some marks of Eastern origin. His father, Ezekiel Margoliouth, had, it is said, been a Rabbi before he became a Christian missionary. His ancestors at one time lived in Poland, but had arrived there from the farther East.

As a classical tutor he was too far removed from his pupils' standard. He might be inspiring, but he was not encouraging. His lectures on Pindar were unlike any other Mods. lectures, and were apt to set the few undergraduates who followed them off in pursuit of abstruse problems, reading scholia and 'poaching in Suidas for unlicensed Greek'. He published by 1884 two little books on Greek tragedy, *Studia Scenica* and an edition of the *Agamemnon*.

Though later, like Verrall, a resolute defender of manuscript readings, he began, at this time, by an over-indulgence in emendation. In *Studia Scenica* he pinned his faith to the 'epoch-making labours of Nauck and Blaydes', and in the *Agamemnon* he largely followed their methods. Neither book was successful. One of his emendations in the *Agamemnon*, indeed, which was almost certainly right, has been generally overlooked by editors. In Aegisthus' account of the murder of his brothers the manuscript gives τρίτον γὰρ ὄντα μ' ἐπὶ δέκ' ἀθλίῳ πατρὶ ξυνεξελαύνει, 'me, being the third *in addition to ten*, he banished'. Margoliouth corrected μ' ἔλιπε κάθλιῳ, 'For me, the third, *he spared and* banished'. (The same correction, he afterwards found, had been proposed by Emper). It may have been disappointment at the reception of these books which led him to forsake Greek, at least temporarily, and since the Chair of Arabic happened to fall vacant, to become a candidate for that. It was, not, I think, that he specially admired or loved Arabic literature. He preferred Greek, though doubtless the survival of Arabic as a spoken language and the vast range of problems which it opened up added to its attractiveness. 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.

After his appointment as Laudian Professor in 1889 his main work was of course Arabic, though he wrote prefaces in vigorous Latin and published two or three *πάρεργα* in Greek. He had already in 1887 published *Analecta Orientalia ad Poeticam Aristophaneam*, in which the Arabic and Syriac translations are edited and used for the textual criticism of the Greek text. (He took an ironic pleasure in the mis-translations, for example where ἐν 'Αυλίδι is taken for a reference to 'the son of Howl', i.e. the jackal, and where τὸν χορὸν ἕνα δαῖ τῶν ὑποκριτῶν ὑπολαμβάνειν was held to assert that 'the Chorus, being in Hell (ἐν ᾿Αδαι) must be counted among the hypocrites'.) This valuable and learned

little book was followed up twenty-four years later by '*The Poetics of Aristotle*, translated from Greek into English and from Arabic into Latin, with a revised text, commentary, glossary and onomasticon'. This is a strange work, impossible to accept as it stands, yet not safely to be neglected by serious students. It seems as if Margoliouth, irritated at the mass of conventional and obvious criticism which has been showered upon the *Poetics*, was determined at every point to dig deeper, and by exaggerating his corrections of the obvious and conventional to make a truer understanding possible. For instance, his translation of the famous definition of Tragedy runs thus: 'A tragedy is, then, the portrayal of an imaginary chapter of heroic life, complete and of some length . . . in dramatic, not narrative, form, indirectly through pity and terror righting mental disorders of this type.' πρόξεως σπουδαίως, translated by Bywater as 'an action which is serious', becomes 'a chapter of heroic life', which at least warns one that a man's πράξις is not how he 'acts', but how he 'fares', and that σπουδαίως is not the same as 'serious'. The correction has truth in it, but is paradoxically overstated. Margoliouth's later venture in Greek scholarship was less fortunate. Always fond of puzzles and anagrams, and always rebellious against current orthodoxies, he found in the first seven lines of the *Iliad* and the first ten of the *Odyssey* anagrams containing the name of Homer with details of his birth, life, and method. When a critic showed that by the same method of anagram you could make the *Medea* and some other plays state that they also were written by Homer, he retorted by producing not merely 'signatures' by anagram but also dates, in the first three couplets of various tragedies, including all the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles. It is difficult to know how far he was serious in these exercises of ingenuity. In putting forward the most serious of them his habitual irony at times showed through. For example, in a copy of *The Poetics of Aristotle* sent to a friend to review, he enclosed in place of a letter a quotation from *Martin Chuzzlewit*: 'We are the

intellect and cream of the airth, the cream of human natur' and the flower of moral force. Our backs is easy riz. We must be cracked up or they rises and we snarls. We shows our teeth, I tell you, fierce. You'd better crack us up, you had.'

But, of course, his reputation rests not on these *Parerga* but on his Oriental studies. Professor Gibb writes:

In the years following his appointment to the Laudian Chair a series of erudite publications—the Arabic papyri in the Bodleian (1893), a translation of part of Baidāwi's Koran-Commentary (1894), and the letters of Abu'l-'Alā (1898) testified to his mastery of some of the most difficult and intricate branches of Arabic literature. After his marriage to Miss Jessie Payne Smith in 1896 he was largely occupied in collaboration with her on her father's *Thesaurus Syriacus*, but found time to issue a series of biblical studies, mostly of a controversial kind.

One controversy was concerned with the Hebrew fragment of *Ecclesiasticus* which was brought back from the East in 1896 by Mrs. Lewis and led to the discovery of further fragments among the Bodleian and British Museum papyri. Margoliouth insisted that the newly discovered text was not original but merely a translation from the Persian, which in turn had been translated from a corrupt text of the Greek. He also maintained that the original text of *Ecclesiasticus* was written in Rabbinical Hebrew, a theory which involved the conclusion that other biblical books, written in classical Hebrew, must be far earlier than scholars have placed them and, for example, that the prophecies in Daniel were made before the event. He published at this time *Lines of Defence of the Biblical Revelation* (1900); an edition of *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, and *Canticles* in the Temple Bible (1902); *The Synoptic Gospels as Independent Witnesses* (1903).

Another controversy ranged round the famous Hebrew papyri discovered at Elephantine, which apparently prove the existence of a Jewish community in Upper Egypt as early as the fifth or even sixth century B.C. Margoliouth suspected that the papyri were modern forgeries, and

though he made few converts to this view he produced some points difficult to answer. Incidentally it may be mentioned that he came once upon an obscure little factory in Sicily engaged in making papyrus, and would inquire mischievously of his friends for what purpose papyrus was now in demand. To quote Professor Gibb again:

With the appearance of *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam* in the 'Heroes of the Nations' series in 1905, Margoliouth for the first time came before the wider public as an interpreter of Islam. This study was followed by *Mohammedanism* in the Home University Library in 1911, and a more important series of Hibbert Lectures on the *Early Development of Mohammedanism*, published in 1914, as well as a number of articles contributed to various encyclopaedias. All three books had a substantial success, and have stood for a generation as the standard English works on their subjects. Amongst Orientalists, however, they had a somewhat mixed reception. The solid learning which had gone into the making of them was universally respected, and the last of the three especially threw new light on many disputed questions. But 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. A similar reception met the publication in 1924 of his Schweich Lectures on the *Early Relations between Arabs and Israelites*, in spite of their masterly handling of the scattered evidences in ancient inscriptions and literary traditions.

Even more startling was an article in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1925 denying and indeed deriding the authenticity of all that pre-Islamic Arabian poetry which is regarded with such special admiration by many experts in Arabic literature. The view he maintained rested largely on a peculiar conception of poetry in general which he had expressed in other contexts. In his last book, the volume on Mohammed in Blackie's 'What did they Teach?' series, published only last year, the views expressed in his earlier books are sturdily reasserted, but the careful reader may perhaps detect, in spite of the familiar irony and astringence of style, some slight softening of their harder edges.

It was in editing and translating Arabic texts that Margoliouth's scholarship found its most congenial field. His prodigious memory, which carried without effort the fruits of a vast range of reading in many languages, was an unequalled instrument for this task. The series of volumes of Yāqūt's *Dictionary of Learned Men* (1907-1927), seven printed volumes, comprising volumes 1 and 3 and an abstract of vol. 4 of the original (vol. 2 and the full text of vol. 4 are apparently lost), was his most celebrated editorial achievement. But to some Arabists his less famous texts—the turgid and allusive Letters of Abu'l-'Alā and the discursive 'Table-Talk' of at-Tanūkhī (1921)—gave a more brilliant exhibition of his powers. The poetical *diwan* of Sibṭ b. at-Ta'awidhī (1903) was a less happy undertaking. As a translator he combined scrupulous accuracy with ease of diction, displayed more especially in his versions of the Chronicle of Miskawaih, with which he supplemented the edition of the text by H. F. Amedroz, both being published together under the title of *The Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate* (1920); and of the 'Table-Talk' (1922), and the *Devil's Delusion* of Ibn al-Jauzī which appeared serially in recent issues of *Islamic Culture*.

He took a special delight in subjects which called as much for ingenuity as for profound knowledge. Hence the special appeal which Arabic papyrology had for him. He spent years in classifying and interpreting the mass of often fragmentary papyri in the Crawford collection at Manchester. A preliminary edition of the more important was issued in 1909 (*Recent Arabic Papyri of the Rylands Collection*), but it was not until 1933 that the complete catalogue was published.

It is characteristic of him that when a foreign Arabic scholar remarked that these fragments were often impossible to decipher, he replied that this was not so; they were perfectly clear, all of them. He omitted to notice that it was only through his own long labour and extraordinary skill that they had become so.

He was by no means deficient in practical energy and ability. In August 1914 he was caught with his wife in Switzerland; he escaped with some difficulty through Genoa, and immediately offered his services to the War Office. He was sent to India, and lectured in Bombay, Calcutta, and the Punjab with marked success. He returned in 1917, while, owing to the lack of shipping, Mrs. Margoliouth had

to remain in India till the end of the war. After 1918 he spent much time in Baghdad and the regions near, where he built up a reputation for knowing Islamic things better than the most learned Muslims themselves, and also for great personal kindness towards Eastern scholars. This is the more remarkable as his sympathies were always with the Christian and Jewish communities rather than the Muslims, and the latter were apt to be scandalized by such remarks about the Prophet as the observation that it was difficult 'entirely to acquit him of some duplicity' when he converted his uncle Hamzah by showing him the Angel Gabriel astride on a clothes-horse.

In England he had many public interests. He worked zealously on the Council of the Royal Asiatic Society, of which he became Director in 1927, and which awarded him its Gold Medal in 1938; he was President of the Eastern Question Association; an able and active Chairman of the Governing Body of the Warneford Asylum. In 1931, as his interest in private study increased and his active teaching diminished, he gave up his house in Oxford and went to live on Boar's Hill. Two years later, by the death of his wife, he lost the close companion and fellow-student of thirty-seven years, but continued his work unabated and in course of time regained his serenity, aided by the devoted companionship of his niece, Miss Moore. He recovered his intellectual interests, continued his writing, and from time to time won prizes for anagrams and cross-words. He took great pleasure in his car, whose machinery he learnt by a three weeks' professional training; and also in his dog, a handsome red setter, whom he liked to address in formal language. She duly 'assumed a recumbent position' when so directed.

Margoliouth's irony, so alarming to strangers, came, it would seem, from the depths of his nature. It was part of a profound scepticism, against which in religious matters he defended himself by the assumption of an extreme and almost paradoxical orthodoxy, but which otherwise pervaded

his general outlook. 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. 'The great thing in life', he once said to a friend, 'is to have an innocent lasting amusement.' When the friend, slightly shocked, demurred, he pursued with an air of candour, 'Should you not say these studies were innocent?' He had not much sensitiveness to beauty in art or letters, and certainly no tendency to overvalue it. It must also be recognized that he had little respect for the current orthodoxies of the learned, and enjoyed setting against them some heresy which they might denounce as absurd or monstrous but which they would find it difficult to disprove. He was interested in his work, interested in play, and in his own sense of humour. The humour depended largely on ὑπόκρισις, the deep musical voice, the melancholy expression, the peculiar pronunciation of certain letters—the Parisian *r*, for instance, instead of the English. When his wife once disturbed him to read an irresistibly funny passage of Wodehouse he replied that 'he could well believe that, if it were well acted, one would see that the author's intention was humorous'.

These things interested or amused him; what really stirred him was pity for human suffering. When it came to that, all irony and scepticism fell away; he was ready to give most generously both of time and of money. Of late years the persecution of the Jewish people, it may almost be said, 'haunted him like a passion'; he worked for them as he had worked before for the Assyrians and Armenians. In his treatment of Mohammed one cannot but notice traces of the general resentment he felt against all conquerors and persecutors. It may be permitted to recall an incident at the beginning of this century. When a famous public man, who was responsible for a successful war of conquest, was receiving honours at Oxford, Margoliouth broke an enigmatic silence by suddenly observing to a friend: 'In books it is assumed that men feel oppressed

when they have the blood of many fellow-creatures on their hands; in real life, apparently, it makes them quite jaunty.'

He was certainly a man of most massive learning and great ingenuity. In problems of scholarship his judgement seems often to have been unbalanced, a fault which was the more conspicuous because he never 'played for safety' or took refuge in vagueness. He was never inaccurate, never slipshod, never unprepared. No scholar of our generation has left so deep and permanent a mark on Oriental studies. When Mr. Gladstone paid a visit to Oxford in the early eighties it was reported that, after seeing many of the lights of the University, he judged that there were two men who in different ways seemed to tower among their contemporaries; one was Charles Gore, the other Margoliouth. 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.

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