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***For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and their Enemies.* By Robert Irwin. London: Allen Lane, 2006. 416 pp. \$49.13.**

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Somewhere in my house lurks a true chimera, an M.A. diploma from a Department of Oriental Studies. By the time I got around to finishing a Ph.D. the name of the department had been changed to Near Eastern Studies. But something larger had changed as well, the very ecology of academia and intellectual life. That change was Orientalism, the theory, cult, and intellectual movement. But before there was Edward Said there was real Orientalism, an intellectual stream that stretches back at least to the Greek encounter with their eastern neighbors. To understand the perversion of the term in the present we must examine the past, and Robert Irwin's monumental new book is as sure a guide as could be imagined. Irwin, Middle East editor for the Times Literary Supplement and a scholar of high skills, has written a definitive if quirky study of Western scholarship on the Arab and Islamic worlds. It is a true history of a diffuse interest developing into an academic discipline, as well as a collection of immensely entertaining portraits in miniature of scholars and scoundrels. The scholarship necessary for such an effort is vast, as the 46 pages of footnotes readily demonstrate, but Irwin also has the literary skills to make the work engaging and feisty.

Irwin has a number of goals. One is to retrieve the good names of scholars from the dung heap upon which they have been cast. This is noble enough, but his aim is also to restore a vision of scholarship as a noble pursuit unsullied by politics or prejudice, or at least separable from the same. Scholarship is not by definition imperialism or racism, or a tool of nationalism and the state. By defying this now essential tenet of intellectual self-definition, where motives and uses count more than learning or wisdom, Irwin is not unlike the founders of Orientalism, who pursued intellectual or religious interest over political utility. Throughout, Irwin keeps his eye on another target, the complete and utter debunking of the pernicious mythology of Said's Orientalism. Irwin dogs and taunts Said throughout before turning his devastating attentions upon the Columbia University professor directly.

In Said's view, Orientalism was a uniform and organic intellectual tradition in service to empire, nationalism, and the state, a Eurocentric system of representation that bored into the very grain of global consciousness and shaped both Orient and Occident. Scholarship, in Said's telling, was imperialism's handmaiden, the means of explaining and justifying domination to imperialists and their new subjects

alike, filled with contempt for the "Other" and rife with contemptuous misrepresentation. Irwin's recounting of two thousand years of Western apprehensions of the "Orient" shows Said's Orientalism to be a cruel and misleading caricature. A review of these lesser-known developments shows how far off base Said was.

As with many things discussion begins with the Jews and the Greeks. Irwin quotes Said's greatest nemesis, Bernard Lewis, who noted how "Greeks and Jews were unique in the ancient world—in their compassion for an enemy." The "Other" was never a fixed or immutable category, and Irwin laments Said's insensitivity to that reality, as well as the specifics of his critiques of the classics. Said's "dyspeptic reading" of The Bacchae was a characteristic misreading of art as propaganda. His inability to see that Euripides addressed the human passions of the irrational rather than an imagined Oriental threat to Greek rationalism sadly presages his subsequent reductionisms.

The earliest Christians writing about Islam saw it as a "pernicious Christian heresy" akin to Arianism, the doctrine of Jesus' human-born status, rejected at the Council of Nicea. By the Middle Ages Orientalism began in earnest

with Christian polemicists against Islam concerned above all with Muslim rejection of Jesus's divinity. Some compositions, recopied for centuries, such as the Christian Arab Al-Kindi's *Risala*, presented an imaged exchange between a Christian and Muslim in which Muhammad is denounced for his violence and polygamy, and highlighted the Qur'an's inconsistencies and loan words.

The Qur'an was first translated from Arabic into Latin in 1143 by Robert of Ketton at the request of Peter the Venerable, the Abbot of Cluny, for the purpose of refutation. Of greater interest were Western scholastics approaching Arab science, mathematics, and philosophy and that of the Greeks by means of Arabic manuscripts. Irwin highlights Avicenna's Aristotelian commentaries in particular, but he also debunks certain politically correct myths, asking "whether much of what was translated was of any value at all. The trouble with Islamic science was that much of it was not particularly scientific." Mathematical texts were translated for their use in divination, and the occult was the major preoccupation of Arabs and scholastics. Even the recovered Greek science was dubious. Avicenna himself recycled the misapprehensions of Hippocrates and Galen and was more renowned as an occultist, while his astronomy was Ptolemaic. "Greek learning, mediated by Arab scholarship, had provided stimulus and misinformation in equal measure." For their part, the Crusades did virtually nothing to spread knowledge to the West in part since the Holy Land was a cultural backwater.

Irwin's discussion of Oriental knowledge from the still obscure

emergence of Islam through the Renaissance produces a certain amount of whiplash. Vast amounts of information are synthesized. From the ninth century monk Ibn Hisham's life of Muhammad to Boccaccio's borrowing of stories from *The One Thousand and One Nights*, a slew of characters are expertly presented and dispatched, with concision and a dry wit.

With the Renaissance, Arab learning began to be rejected by scholars like Bacon and Petrarch who, along with many others, sought out original Greek and Latin texts rather than faulty Arabic translations. The period saw both useful insights and flights of fancy. Nicholas of Cusa's fifteenth-century analysis of the Qur'an contained speculations about Jewish and Christian influences that would only be pursued four centuries later. Pico della Mirandola and others were in thrall to the mysteries of Egyptian hieroglyphs and the fraudulent hermetic writings. These and other studies were undertaken against a concrete background, the continuing onslaught of Muslim empires against the Mediterranean, Africa, and Europe, not to speak of India.

What little Oriental learning went on was also shadowed by fear of relentless Ottoman imperialism that declined only with the Treaty of Carlowitz in 1699, at which time, as Irwin notes, there was no European intellectual interest in Turkey whatsoever. Jewish and Christian interpreters, dragomen (from the Arabic word "to translate"), sufficed. Scholarship remained blissfully aloof from international geopolitics. In France, d'Herbelot's encyclopedic *Bibliothèque orientale* was an ex-

ample of the effort to organize all knowledge along Gallic lines. The Comte de Boulainvillier's *Vie de Mahomet* was really "an exercise in church- and establishment-bashing," while, in England, Simon Ockley's two-volume *The History of the Saracens* was more scholarly. Ockley was an excellent illustration of the type of person doing Oriental studies. As the Thomas Adams Chair of Arabic at Cambridge, on the one hand Ockley believed that the West added not "a single iota to the accumulated knowledge of the East." On the other he completed the second volume of his great work in prison, having been arrested for debt, where he died, leaving a wife and six children.

Other colorful and significant characters included Sir William "Oriental" Jones, who mastered thirteen languages "and dabbled in twenty-eight." His translations of Persian and Arabic poetry were admired but he had to make a living as a barrister and judge. While in Bengal in 1784 he founded the Asiatic Society and also had the prescient insight to link the common ancestry of Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit. Elsewhere philology, not "representation," was the scholarly norm.

But the eighteenth century saw decisive changes in global geopolitics and the growth of European empires at the expense of Asian and other empires. The vast bulk of British imperialism was directed at the Western Hemisphere, where a series of deadly wars were being fought with France, Britain's favored "Other." From the mid-eighteenth century, British attentions were turned increasingly toward India, while France faced the Mediterranean, the Dutch the South Asia archipelagos, and Russia expanded

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into Central Asia. The impact on scholarship, however, was scarcely visible. Only in Russia was an official school for Oriental languages established in connection with imperial expansion.

Then, in 1798, Napoleon and his fleet appeared on the coast of Egypt. This opened a particularly evil chapter for Said, who blamed Comte de Volney for inspiring Napoleon to conquest when in fact it was French merchantist interests in Marseilles. Said also got Volney's message wrong, since the latter correctly predicted that conquest of Egypt would be a disaster. As Irwin tartly states, "the 1798 French expedition of Egypt was a military disaster to be compared with the Gallipoli landings, the Arnhem parachute drop, and Dien Bien Phu." Indeed, Volney himself was "an Arab nationalist before most Arabs were."

The era of learning ushered in so dramatically and catastrophically by Napoleon was to be extraordinary. Napoleon's savants spread out over Egypt and produced the first systematic natural history of that country, but their Pharaonic focus contributed little to Arabic or Islamic studies. Figures such as Silvestre de Sacy, who produced massive works on Arabic grammar and linguistics, and the founding of learned societies set a new level of organization and discipline. Amateurs, scholars, nobles, and natives worked together in these learned societies and new intellectual streams began to emerge. French students of de Sacy produced philologically oriented editions of Arabic texts, reintroducing, for example, Ibn Khaldun to emerging historical and sociological thought. German scholars, though

lacking any imperial connections to India, felt the pull of Sanskrit and Indo-Aryan languages that would soon produce disagreeable results. Irwin notes that "Indian Brahmins distinguished between Aryan and non-Aryan, equating this with civilized and non-civilized, and this was taken up in the first place by German Orientalists."

German dominance in biblical and classical studies also meant that these critical approaches could be applied to Islamic and Arabic materials. In this, the appearance of newly emancipated German Jews was critical. Abraham Geiger (who returned Jewish studies) and Gustav Weil (who, influenced by Ranke, wrote a five-volume biography of Muhammad) were joined by other Jews such as the Hungarian Ignaz Goldziher (whom Irwin calls the "Greatest of the Orientalists" for his "sheer brilliance and industry"). Drawing on the German and Jewish Enlightenments, mastery of Semitic languages and the Jewish and classical traditions, Jews opened up entirely new vistas regarding the development of Islam in its comparative setting.

Importantly, these Jewish scholars recognized Islam's pervasive borrowings and alterations to their own tradition. Only in the later twentieth century did it become churlish if not impossible to speak of such things, the preference being indulging the fetish of pristine origins. To analyze critically is to give offense, and more lately to receive threats. At the same time, Jewish Orientalists of the nineteenth century indulged in their own sorts of apologetics, helping to invent the pernicious historical myth of Muslim Golden Ages of Tolerance. The political context

of these interpretations was deliberately anti-Christian but has lately been manipulated for Muslim apologetics.

In England, the epicenter of empire, however, there was a marked dearth of Oriental scholars. Countless Englishmen had practical experience of the Orient and in India languages and learning flourished. India was also a great multicultural experiment where "races," languages, and lifeways mixed freely. After about 1830, the British mood on India soured, as reflected in the attitudes of Mill and Macaulay, who saw Greek and Latin as the foundations for British education. So complete was the turnabout that only a few decades later Sir Richard Burton complained bitterly about the lack of Oriental languages and learning in Britain.

Ernest Renan was one of Said's "Orientalist archvillains," de Gobineau being the other, both of whom he misapprehended. Renan's Hebrew was better than his Arabic, and a century ago Goldziher had already noted the inadequacy of his scholarship. As Irwin puts it, Renan's temperament was "romantic, speculative and slapdash." A scientific racist and atheist, Renan disliked Islam, thought favorably of Muhammad, and fancied Germans. For his part, de Gobineau, soldier, diplomat and novelist, had his racism informed, so to speak, by tours of duty in Tehran. He favored racial separation, fancied Persia, loathed the United States, and speculated idiotically about Aryans. During a period of pervasive racism, and not just European, their attitudes, though unserious, are treated fairly by Irwin, who shows how little influence they had on Orientalism as a whole.

The rest of the nineteenth century is filled with colorful characters such as the archetypal Burton whose “efforts to teach himself Arabic were seriously impeded by his failure to realize that Arabic was written from right to left,” as well as serious scholars such as William Wright and David Samuel Margoliouth. Meanwhile, in Germany, Julius Wellhausen moved freely between Jewish and Islamic studies. Best known for having “demonstrated, to his own satisfaction at least, that the *Penatateuch* was composed by four different writers,” he “preferred his ancient Hebrews to be wild and hard-drinking,” and then applied the same critical methods to Islamic sources. By the end of the nineteenth century a real academic discipline had arrived.

Irwin dwells on the early centuries of Oriental scholarship and drives home its antiquity, complexity, lack of imperial entanglement, as well as the breadth of attitudes toward Muslims and Arabs among its practitioners. The later nineteenth and twentieth centuries are equally complex if no less colorful. Names, still unfairly obscure, such as Snouck Hurgronje and Lammens gave way to Massignon, whose “history of Islam was permeated by esoteric and Christological themes that only he and his disciples found in that history,” and then Gibb, Arberry, Schacht, Grunebaum, and others. Along the way Irwin shines a light into the dark alleys of Nazi and Bolshevik Orientalism, the somewhat more palatable French Marxists like Claude Cahen and Maxime Rodinson, and the “British patricians” such as Bernard Lewis, P. J. Vatikiotis, and Elie Kedourie. Lewis and Manchester-born Albert Hourani were also great popular-

izers of Islamic history whose books are found in every Barnes and Noble. These scholars form the proximate history to Said’s Orientalism, but they were also able defenders of the old ways. There was still nothing in Oriental scholarship that was used to justify imperial expansion.

Irwin’s review of twentieth-century Orientalists includes an increasing number of non-Western practitioners. Some of these are giants like Iraqi-born Kedourie, while others like Kedourie’s arch-nemesis A. L. Tibawi, whose offprints are treasured as “masterpieces of unintended comedy,” are deservedly less well known. Israel has emerged as a leading center of Oriental scholarship, and the United States has produced scholars of the first rank, but a marked and undeniable decline has set in, reminiscent of the earlier episodes when European universities decayed into irrelevance. Driven by the bottom line, programs are being cut and practical studies rule the roost. It has recently been announced, for example, that Sanskrit will no longer be taught at Cambridge. Other trends are also at work. Tenured obscurantists clone themselves in their students, moving further and further away from engagement with texts and deeper into the solipsism and narcissism of subjective cultural judgments. Elsewhere, Irwin has lamented the demise of British Middle East Studies, pointing among other things to the dominance of Muslims in the field and its gradual transformation into an outpost of postcolonial nonsense and Islamic apologetics. It is fair to say that the very essence of Middle East Studies has mutated to something deeply unserious, part anti-Western polemic, part libera-

tion theology. That is the essence of Edward Said’s Orientalism.

Irwin mentions casually that he has no great disagreements with Said’s views on literature, Zionism or politics, but Irwin’s vehemence regarding Said’s abuse of real Orientalism is unrelenting. The comments below are intended to complement Irwin’s critique. What Said did was in fact more significant and damaging than simple fraud or charlatanry; he created, and then became a captive of, a system. His Orientalism was not simply a theory, a set of ideas designed to explain a particular set of facts, but rather it became an all-encompassing explanation for virtually all of modernity. It explained, in its haphazard and impoverished way, history and literature, the psychology of conqueror and the conquered, the past as well as the present. Culture and representation, the intellectual refractions, became the primary object of scholarship, rather than the actions of kings and armies or subalterns in the mud. These intellectualist versions of history put mind above stomach and accounted for a great deal of Orientalism’s appeal to academics. It put them, in a sense, at the forefront of history, its production and, more importantly, resistance to same. By denying that Europeans could or should attempt study of non-Europeans, lest they, as outsiders, factually misrepresent or by serving empire, act on impure motives, the system effectively makes explanation a kind of impossibility. Except, perhaps, by initiates.

Said’s system of Orientalism, where the conqueror subordinates the conquered politically and, more importantly, culturally and psychologically, rather reflects

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actual historical institutions, jihad, and dhimmitude, the subjugation of the infidel by Islam, but Said never mentions this. Nor does he speak in any serious terms about Islam, except to mouth statements about its diversity and irreducibility. That he managed to reduce the West to a series of parodic ciphers is another thing.

This Orientalism to intellectuals is an identifiable brand to which everything can be related, it is a flag flown by academics in their turf wars with one another, whose superiority and timelessness can be asserted as fact, and, most importantly, because it is an explicit political statement about how the world should work, shaking off the chains imposed by the West, it is morally unassailable. To be against Orientalism is to be primitive at best, and a retrograde slaveholder in making at worst. This alone has shut off discussion of its preposterousness, and has helped the true of heart defend the bastions of academia. To hire one of them would be to accept not only divergent ideas into the academy but to sully its mission as the liberator of mankind in the age of late capitalism, or at least late teenagers in the humanities and social sciences.

The short analysis may be that Said's whole project, for whatever reason, was to turn the West into the "Other" and then to alienate its own intellectuals. In this he succeeded brilliantly. His Orientalism has been a stifling orthodoxy, all the more infuriating thanks to having permeated into countless fields. The ultimate irony is that Said's evident contempt for the Orient, passive, weak, unable to stand up

to the West's imperialism or representations, is the perfect, unwitting, and perhaps sole example of his own thesis.

The precise mechanisms of Said's and Orientalism's success are largely unexplained. A few years ago in a review of Martin Kramer's book on American Middle East Studies I suggested these successes were attributable to Said's persona and the larger American university environment, as altered by the events of 1968. These are middle-scale conditions.

At the same time, Orientalism, rather like Marxism, has pretenses to sweep and grandeur, and like Marxism in all its flavors, has infinite appeal to intellectuals precisely because it pretends to offer both the analysis and point to the solution.

Since that time I have spoken with a number of Columbia graduates of the 1950s, all of whom were at pains to emphasize the institutional anti-Semitism and prevalence of Stalinist professors aggressively arguing the case for totalitarianism, inside and outside the classroom. Politics is part of the very fabric at Columbia, as it is in many places, but magnified by the outsize dimensions of New York City and the outsize egos of faculty and students alike, acculturated to think of themselves as the progressive cutting edge. The Department of

Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures at Columbia was established precisely as a vehicle for Said's ideas. This is the micro-scale of local culture, Foucault's power-knowledge nexus dropped like a daisy cutter in the academic trenches of Morningside Heights.

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solution. It was timely, coming after the 1960s when the campus balance of power had shifted away from the faculty, or at least the administration, and toward the students and the gratification of their personal needs and pedagogical wants. Here it is useful to recall that not a few faculty members, by inclination or design, in effect abetted students in their power grab. One notable was Herbert Marcuse, who had intellectually prepared students for their psychodramatic outburst with doleful analyses of American society's one-dimensionality,

substituting a turgid utopianism where at least everyone would be having lots of sex. The celebrity professor who told students what they wanted to hear was well established by the time Said came along.

Many other factors contributed to Orientalism's ascendance. Sixties Third Worldism, nurtured on the one hand by the stolid Peace Corps but more fervently by the Vietnam War, Che and guerrilla chic, a cult of revolutionary violence via Franz Fanon, the exploration of Eastern religions, Castroism, Nyerere's

Ujama and all the other revolutionary socialist fads, by the elision of the civil rights movement into the Black Panthers and revolutionary violence, and the obvious weakness of American political institutions. All the causes, all the explanations, and all the deference shown, at least by intellectuals, to whatever came down the pike, softened up the academy for Said.

And there was the Six Day War. For Said this was a seminal event, and others, namely Said's antithesis Fouad Ajami, have charted the war's titanic effect on Arab intellectuals. The Arab world had provoked a war and lost it to a tiny non-Muslim country, upending both Muslim and Arab views of how history should be. For Said, thoroughly Americanized, the effect was compounded by a recognition of his Palestinian heritage that he had forgotten or put to the side.

The cult of Palestine, the "underdog"—but more importantly the underdog with the beret and the gun—became an important intellectual current from the late 1960s onward. Israel, no longer the multicultural socialist paradise of the intellectual (and Zionist) imaginary, became the quintessential white outpost of Western imperialism, and the rest is history. Vast resources are devoted to Palestine, its culture and history, and to the indefinite perpetuation of the inheritable statuses of refugeedom and victimhood. Said's Orientalism is an important part of that effort. About indigenous regimes and their

malfeasances Said had relatively little to say, but about Israel and Palestine Said's outpourings were legion.

Here Said was the perfect model of a "scholar-activist," devoted to the cause (its perpetuation rather than resolution through normal politics), and to the constant, unending, unceasing assertion of grievance. With Palestine nothing could be said too many times, all reality was subordinated to the master narrative of Israeli perfidy, Palestinian (elite) stupidity, and most of all, Palestinian suffering. Here, too, is a key to Orientalism; all-powerful, the West and Israel rolled over the Orient and Palestine, while indigenous elites were too corrupt, effete and inept to resist. In the end, Said's Orientalism is an intellectualized lashing out at his own heritage, which mires it further.

What remains of either Orientalism? On the one hand, Orientalism the fetish is going the way of all paradigms, wasting away slowly thanks to its own entrenched emptiness. The cultural turn, solipsistic, vain and angry, continues to dominate in academia generally, and Said's Orientalism, with its political program, continues to distort. It is being eaten both by empirical reality and by ambitious small fry eager to feast—in the best manner of academic advancement—on the body of the progenitor. On the other hand, real Orientalism is in a fairly wretched state. Philology, archival research, and primary texts

are unsexy, largely ignored by the public and, more importantly, by the intelligentsia, attuned to the abovementioned solipsism and political foot-stamping. It is not, as they say, incentivized.

Irwin's story gives hope that all might not be lost. After all, the history of Orientalism before the nineteenth century and that of the university as a whole, together, show that with a little luck and a lot of focus disciplines and institutions can become vital and interesting again. The traumas of 9/11, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and against radical Islam globally, have highlighted the obvious need for Oriental learning, but Said's version has contributed little except to recapitulate Muslim grievances and to impugn the motives of those who interrogate the grievances. Still, information can no longer be monopolized by academics. Google may search out the lowest common denominator, but real scholarship both accessible and esoteric has also spread via the Web. The popularity of Bernard Lewis, the bane of Saidians everywhere, is one such sign. It will take time. In the meantime, we can turn to Irwin and read about how the discipline made and then unmade itself. Perhaps it can remake itself once again and I can take my diploma out of hiding.

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