

A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF TEXTBOOKS FOR MIDDLE EASTERN HISTORY

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At the 1995 meeting of the Middle East Studies Association a group of colleagues and I were sitting around a table consuming a variety of beverages and discussing, of all things, textbooks. Predictably, there was not consensus, especially as one of the group was the author of a text and each of us had a slightly different approach to our courses that rendered one text more useful than another. Three points of general agreement emerged and all are predictable: no text was perfect, there are several good texts available, and there are also some texts that are not recommended.

This article is a critical assessment of selected texts currently available for Middle Eastern history. It is not exhaustive; I have not included every possible text; and I hope that this piece will encourage readers who know of other texts to write reviews and submit them to the journal. My principal audience is the non-specialist college teacher who, though he or she might have had a Ph.D. field in Middle Eastern history, now has responsibility for teaching a course but feels ill-prepared. I have been there. In a previous academic incarnation I taught a survey of East Asian history with my own training limited to a one-year survey taken in the first year of my undergraduate career. Those teaching the world civilizations survey, at both the college and high school level, will also find some of these texts useful as references for covering Middle Eastern topics.

The first issue to be resolved in selecting the text is the geographic content of the course. My own course is a two-semester Islamic World survey that covers everywhere that one finds Muslims, which for the twentieth century, at least, is the entire world. A more traditional approach is the Middle East survey that covers Turkey, Iran, Israel (at least for the twentieth century), and the Arab world, sometimes including North Africa, sometimes not. I teach a one-semester upper-division course "The Modern Middle East" (sometimes including North Africa, sometimes not) that covers the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Finally, there is the Arab World option, that generally excludes the Turks, Persians, and Israelis. Textbooks exist for all three options.

Other issues to be resolved include where to divide the course chronologically and whether one prefers a thematic or geographic/country approach. The two-semester survey seems most common, and I divide my survey with the nineteenth century. One could just as easily pick an earlier time period, such as the establishment of the Ottoman hegemony throughout the Middle East in the sixteenth century. The "thematic or country" question applies mostly to modern history, and I have alternated between the two. Once again, there are textbooks to suit these various considerations.

Two comprehensive Islamic World surveys exist that could be used as texts but are more valuable as reference works: P. M. Holt, Ann K. S. Lambton, and Bernard Lewis, editors, *The Cambridge History of Islam* (2 volumes [cloth] or 4 volumes [paper]; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), and Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (3 volumes; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974). Volume one of *The Cambridge History* covers the political

history of the "central Islamic lands" (the paperback edition divides at 1918) and volume two includes political developments in India, South-East Asia, Africa, and the Muslim West, and more general cultural history of Islamic society and civilization (the paperback edition separates the political from the society and civilization). This is your straightforward Cambridge history tradition with first-rate articles written by leading authorities. The presentation of the political history is divided among geographic regions (Arab lands, Anatolia, Persia, Central Asia) throughout, while the cultural history is more integrated. Its major weaknesses as a text are expense and organization. Another serious problem for the *Cambridge History* is that it is now almost thirty years out of date.

The *Venture of Islam* is something different, a comprehensive personal interpretation of Islamic World history by a single scholar. The volumes are divided into "The Classical Age of Islam," "The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods," and "The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times." Hodgson has sought to integrate all aspects of "Islamdom" into an integrated "civilization," in the grand tradition of "Western Civilization." It is a stimulating but occasionally frustrating work as Hodgson offers sometimes unique interpretations of Islamic civilization. It is obviously best suited for a three-semester or three-quarters survey. Its problem is, like the *Cambridge History*, that it is now dated.

If you still want to teach the entire Muslim World, do not despair. Highly recommended is Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988 [available in paperback]). Although one might assume that this is either a summary or updating of the *Cambridge History*, it is closer to Hodgson's *Venture of Islam* in style and content. Lapidus has sought to present a single narrative of "one of the great spiritual families of mankind" from pre-Islamic times in the Middle East to twentieth century Islam in Africa and Asia. The major weakness is that modern Islam in Europe and America is ignored, although this is understandable within Lapidus's definition of Islamic World (societies dominated by Islamic values). The book is nicely suited to a two-semester survey, with slightly less than half dealing with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Lapidus follows a geographic approach, focusing on specific regions. This is the text that I use in my "Islamic World" survey.

Carl Brockelmann, *History of the Islamic Peoples* (London: Routledge, 1980), lays claim to being the "first one-volume history giving the story of all the Islamic states and people from the beginning to the present day." The first part of the statement may well be true, but the book actually covers the Middle East, North Africa, Sudan, and Afghanistan. The major weakness of the book is that it was originally published in 1939, although some material has been added in subsequent imprints to bring it up to date.

While texts for Islamic world history are somewhat limited, the more traditional Middle East survey offers more choices. An excellent multi-volume survey is the *Near East History Series* edited by P. M. Holt and published by Longman. The series includes seven volumes by six different authors: Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphs*, 1986; P. M. Holt, *The Age of the Crusades*, 1986; Colin Imber, *The Rise of the Ottoman Empire 1300-1574*, forthcoming; M. E. Yapp, *The Making of the Modern Near East 1792-1923*, 1987; M. E. Yapp, *The Near East since the First World War*, 1991; and David

Morgan, *Medieval Persia 1040-1797*, 1988. These works cover the Middle East proper (no North Africa). While this series does not offer the comprehensive coverage of the Muslim World found in *The Cambridge History* and *The Venture of Islam*, a minor disadvantage for most course offerings, it is more up to date than either, offers a more traditional narrative than *The Venture of Islam*, but has the advantage of the interpretive history of the single author for each of the major time periods lacking in the *Cambridge History*. The disadvantage is the division into seven volumes; I would have preferred that Iran be integrated into the other volumes. Also, a four-volume series would have been more useful for the two-semester survey, although, like *The Venture of Islam*, this division works well for a three-semester or quarter survey. Finally, these are detailed works dealing almost exclusively with political history that threaten to overwhelm even upper-division students. On balance though, I recommend this series highly and use the two volumes by Yapp as the text for my Modern Middle East course.

Two single-volume texts stand out for the Middle East survey: Sidney Nettleton Fisher and William Oschenwald, *The Middle East: A History* (Fourth Edition, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990 [available in paperback with the fifth edition currently in preparation]), and Arthur Goldschmidt, Jr., *A Concise History of the Middle East* (Third Edition, Boulder: Westview Press, 1988). Fisher and Oschenwald has been around since 1959 and is as close to a standard as exists in the field. Coverage is the Middle East proper (no North Africa but includes Sudan) from pre-Islamic times to the present with a very nice balance between political and cultural history, especially for the period through the golden ages of the Ottoman and Safavid Empires. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries receive more extensive coverage and the approach is markedly more political. As the title implies, the Goldschmidt work is much briefer. Coverage is essentially the same (Goldschmidt generally ignores Sudan), although the approach is very different. Oschenwald tends to focus on political entities (Ottoman Empire, Iraq, Saudi Arabia) whereas Goldschmidt is more thematic ("Shi'is and Turks," "The Roots of Arab Bitterness," "The Reassertion of Islamic Power"). Like Oschenwald, Goldschmidt emphasizes the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Goldschmidt is perhaps a bit more accessible to the average student. My one criticism of Goldschmidt is that he does tend to see the entire twentieth century as focusing around the Palestine/Israel issue.

Other general Middle Eastern texts exist. Glenn E. Perry, *The Middle East: Fourteen Islamic Centuries* (Second Edition, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1991), is a briefer survey. The text covers the Middle East proper and has more of a thematic approach. Almost two-thirds of the book is devoted to nineteenth and twentieth-century events. Peter Mansfield, *A History of the Middle East* (New York: Penguin, 1992), should more accurately be entitled *History of the Modern Middle East or even Modern Arab World and Iran* as the coverage of Turkey is weak. It is a good narrative political history. Yahya Armajani and Thomas M. Ricks, *Middle East: Past and Present* (Second Edition, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1986), includes the Middle East proper and follows the country by country approach. Like the Perry book, about two-thirds of the text is devoted to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The book is plagued by some major factual errors.

For the modern Middle East a brand new text is William Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994). Cleveland covers the Middle East proper (no North Africa, no Sudan) from the late eighteenth century to the present. He presents a brief but useful background. The theme of Cleveland's text is the "transformation" of the Middle East from the traditional Islamic milieu to the modernizing or westernizing (terms with which Cleveland is uncomfortable) of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (xiv). Like Oschenwald, Cleveland tends to focus on individual or groups of states and has much less emphasis on the Palestine/Israel issue than Goldschmidt. While similar in approach to the Yapp volumes mentioned above, Cleveland does not have quite the detail. That is not a fatal flaw for a text. It does offer the advantage of reasonable price. I am giving it serious consideration for adoption for my undergraduate survey and using Yapp at the graduate level. For the non-specialist, Yapp would be an outstanding reference with Cleveland as a text.

Finally, there are several texts that focus on the Middle East specifically through the Arab world. The most recent is the much publicized Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991). Hourani covers the Arab World (including North Africa and Sudan but not Iran, Israel, or Turkey) from pre-Islamic times to the present with a fairly even division around the nineteenth century. The approach is thematic for the modern period with the great strength of the book being its coverage of social and cultural issues. It is a wonderful book and recommended for anyone wanting to understand the Arab world and Islamic civilization. The weakness as a text for Middle Eastern history is that it only covers the Arabs.

Among the other Arabocentric texts are William R. Polk, *The Arab World Today* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), which originally was published as *The United States and the Arab World*. The current title is more accurate as the book emphasizes Arab political history since World War I and includes a discussion of United States relations with the Arab world as the final chapter. Polk includes Libya and Sudan in his Arab World and tends to emphasize the Arab-Israeli struggle. Peter Mansfield, *The Arabs* (New York: Penguin, 1992), is actually a more detailed presentation of material in his *History of the Middle East*. John Bagot Glubb, *Short History of the Arab Peoples* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1970), is a dated popular history. Finally, the pioneering works by Philip Hitti, *History of the Arabs* (Tenth Edition, New York: St. Martin's, 1970), and *The Arabs: A Short History* (Longwood, FL: Regnery Publishers, 1956), are classic works of more value historiographically than as texts.

There are, of course, many things to be said against all of the books discussed above; there is no perfect textbook, although this is more commonly a complaint of the specialist. However, at almost any level of instruction, both teachers and students will be well-served by selecting texts by Lapidus, Oschenwald, Goldschmidt, Cleveland, or Hourani for classes in Middle Eastern history.