

Robert Irving, *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and their Enemies*, London: Penguin Books, 2007, 410, ISBN 978 0 140 28923 7, USD 35.

Reviewed by Christopher J. Davey

This book is about Orientalism and its review here may seem to lack relevance. However in many respects archaeologists who work in the Middle East are Orientalists as are those who study a well known eastern book, the Bible. The failure to appreciate the oriental origin of much of Biblical literature has often led Western scholarship to misunderstand its meaning.

According to Irving it was not until the work of Julius Wellhausen and William Robertson Smith in the nineteenth Century that the oriental nature of the Bible was treated seriously. Western universities had instead focussed on Classics and Biblical studies overlooking Arabic and other Eastern languages and culture. Irving's book is in many ways a story of the fortunes, or more often misfortunes, of the study of Arabic in the West.

Robert Irving is a well published researcher associated with the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London. In this book he has written a history of the intellectual relationship between East and West as it appears from Western literature beginning with Herodotus and Xenophen. The 'book contains many sketches of individual Orientalists – dabblers, obsessives, evangelists, freethinkers, madmen, charlatans, pedants, romantics.' Many interesting characters pass through these pages.

He barely mentions the Crusaders who destroyed much Arab literature and instead focuses on the other end of the Mediterranean where in medieval Spain scholarship was immersed in Arabic texts that were later to contribute to the Renaissance. Irving does not overstate this contribution and instead traces European curiosity in Eastern languages, Arabic in particular. Interest in Arabic was driven by its usefulness for Old Testament studies and for contact with the Eastern Church.

English interest did not develop with any seriousness until Chairs in Arabic were established at Cambridge and then Oxford soon after 1630. The Bodleian Library at Oxford had already accumulated a good collection of Arabic texts. But no one seems to have been interested in Islam, something that may be understandable given the expansion of the Ottoman Empire across Europe; Vienna was besieged by the Turks in 1529 and 1683.

Discussion about Oriental matters was written in Latin for the convenience of scholars throughout Europe, and it was not until *The Thousand and One Nights* was translated and published in French by Antoine Galland (1704-1717) that a general interest in the East began.

Irving traces the origin of modern Orientalism to Silvestre de Sacy who worked in the French public service and learnt

Arabic, Syriac and many other Eastern languages during the French Revolution and in 1795 became a professor in the Ecole spéciale des langues orientales vivantes. By the time of his death in 1838, most competent Orientalists in Europe had been trained by him and there were many Oriental institutions founded as a result of his activity.

Most European scholars, including de Sacy, were Christian and regarded Muhammad as an impostor. Where Islam was studied, scholars often focussed on oriental sects with which there was some identification. It was a Hungarian Jew, Ignaz Goldziher, who while living in Cairo in 1874 came to the belief that Islam was better than Judaism and Christianity. This outlook caused Goldziher some personal inconvenience as he continued to be employed by Jewish organisations.

In 1905 Louis Massignon met Goldziher and became his 'intellectual son'. Irving devotes a comparatively large section to Massignon who he dubs a 'holy madman'. Both Goldziher and Massignon were brilliant scholars and both engaged sympathetically with their subject matter living for significant periods in the Middle East. Massignon focussed on the teachings of al-Hallaj, a Sufi mystic who was executed for heresy in Baghdad in 922. Like most Western scholars he disliked Shi'a Islam, but unlike most of them according to Irving, he had a fondness for lying on tombs, supported the cult of Joan of Arc and meditated on redemptory suffering.

It is in the later parts of Irving's history that we get these intriguing images of those who have interacted with Eastern literature and culture. There are many truly interesting people and one often wishes that Irving would pursue the implications of their work with more than the odd sentence.

The occasion for this book is Edward Said's *Orientalism* published in 1978. Said carried out a similar survey of Western study of the East and questioned its legitimacy and morality. Said's book has coloured all oriental study since and according to Irving has led to a general disenchantment with the enterprise and even to the closure of some university oriental studies departments.

Irving dislikes Said and his book with a passion, but this need not distract the reader because he has confined his comments and invective to the Introduction and Chapter 9. Irving establishes that *Orientalism* contains many errors of fact and that its assessments are often questionable. The fact that many of these features have been known since the first publication of Said's book leaves Irving mystified at its continued popularity.

Irving even quotes Israelis who question Said's Palestinian credentials, as they did Arafat. However, this is the point, whenever Said, or any of his countrymen who are not confined to refugee camps, prisons or the occupied territories cross an international frontier the inconvenience and humiliation to which they are subjected leaves them in no doubt about their nationality. Said believed that the

discarding of his people had been made possible by the way the West has studied the East.

Irving has no interest in this question. Indeed he lauds Israeli oriental studies, 'For obvious reasons, Israel has use for trained Arabists and some of them do important work for the army and Mossad while on national service.'(271) That this work may involve the denial of human rights and crimes against humanity does not warrant any comment of concern by him.

Orientalism for Irving is an academic exercise where points are scored or lost and in the best English scholastic tradition participants are assumed to contribute to the enterprise in good faith. Said on the other hand believed that the arrogance of Westerners, including Orientalist scholars, led to the framing of the Balfour Declaration and all the subsequent tragedies his people have suffered. For Said, even the identification of the Orient as a field of academic study exhibited arrogance.

Irving has arrogance in abundance often making disparaging and personally derogatory comments about Said in brackets. One need look no further for an illustration of the attitude that so concerned Said. Contrary to the credits, this book has not banished the ghosts of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, rather it epitomizes his very point. However Chapter 9 aside, it is not a bad yarn and leaves one wishing that life had afforded more time for the study of Arabic literature.