

In Memoriam

Edward W. Said (1935-2003)

Honorary Fellow of MESA

Edward Said was a man of vast erudition and learning, of extraordinary versatility and remarkable expertise across disciplines, ranging far beyond the field of English and comparative literature where he made his name and where he was the pre-eminent scholar of his generation. His death has been deeply mourned in the world of music, the fields of cultural studies, literary criticism, and post-colonial studies, and the disciplines of anthropology and history, as well as in Middle East studies. In these and in many other areas, the passing of Edward Said has meant the loss of one of the most profound, original, and influential thinkers of the past half-century. Among Palestinians and Arabs as well, Said will be sadly missed as a fearless independent voice speaking truth to the entrenched powers that dominate the Middle East.

We know more about Said's life and background and concerns than we do about the lives of most scholars because of his fascinating memoir, *Out of Place*. This book reveals the origins of Said's concern with the relationship between power and knowledge, going back to his days as a westernized, upper class Arab boy in oppressive British colonial schools in Egypt. There also can be found the roots of his concern with questions of origins and of his sense of permanent alienation, as a privileged Palestinian who spent much of his youth in, but was not of, Egypt, as a Christian in a primarily Muslim society, and finally as an intellectual of Arab origins in American society. The accounts of his school days in particular are both painful and amusing, but are also enlightening for the intimate and profound understanding they convey of the inner workings of colonial structures of power and influence. From this it was but a long, learned step to the important arguments of two of Said's most influential books, *Orientalism*, and *Culture and Imperialism*, wherein he laid out in masterful fashion some of the intricate ways in which knowledge and power are intertwined.

Said's academic career began conventionally, with schooling at an elite prep school, a B.A. at Princeton, a Ph.D. at Harvard, and an appointment at Columbia in 1963 as an assistant professor of English and comparative literature. Soon after the publication of his well-received first book, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966), the June 1967 war profoundly affected Said, and in many ways changed his life and the course of his intellectual career. His productivity in his own field continued unabated, with *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975), *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1983), and *Representations*

of the Intellectual (1994) all meeting with general acclaim, and further burnishing his critical reputation. Nevertheless, 1967 began a major transformation of Said's interests and outlook, and a deepening of his understanding even of his own field.

The first result was the seminal *Orientalism* (1978), which was both a major work of literary criticism, and the first sign of the new turn in Said's thinking. This book has deeply affected the field of Middle East studies – who in the field can forget the debate between him and Bernard Lewis at the MESA conference in Boston in 1986 – but was also immensely influential in all scholarly fields involving thinking about, researching, and writing on other cultures, such as anthropology and history. It had a strong impact on the key figures in the development of Subaltern Studies, and helped to create a new field, that of post-colonial studies. Said's book argued that the great works of European Orientalism were as much about the construction of the West as they were about "the East," and that this great scholarly tradition, which he respected, was deeply imbricated in relations of power, and flourished with European expansion into the Islamic world. His book aroused the antagonism of persistent critics. Their caviling is with us still a quarter of a century later, in the form of affirmations that the entire Middle East field is subject to Said's baneful influence, and other even more far-fetched assertions. Clearly, Said had hit a nerve by pointing to the connections between the construction of knowledge about a world, and the powers that were engaged in subjugating it, connections about which some intellectuals and would-be intellectuals are still apparently deeply sensitive.

The ire of these critics was perhaps intensified by Said's increasingly eloquent espousal of the cause of Palestine in the 37 years between 1967 and his death. Giving a voice to the voiceless, speaking intelligibly for the first time to Western audiences that had never suspected that the Palestinians had a case, and at the same time criticizing without flinching the failings of Palestinian and Arab structures of power, Said played an enormous role in beginning to balance the entirely one-sided portrayal of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and of the Arab world and Islam in the west. Honored more in Europe and the rest of the world than in the United States, even there he nevertheless made a major dent in the smug ignorance (at best) that prevails around these subjects. His humanism, his utter lack of chauvinism, and his deeply sympathetic understanding of the tragedies that have afflicted the history not only of the Palestinians, but also of the Jews, gave him a unique ability to speak across the divides that bedevil discourse on this subject.

In his later works, notably *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), *Out of Place* (1999), and *Reflections on Exile* (2000), Said synthesized insights that had illuminated many of his earlier works, but here found a mature form. Indeed, the quality of his output improved as he became older and more reflective, particularly after he was stricken in 1991 by the fatal disease that ultimately killed him. At the same time, his productivity grew even further after he became ill: he produced an impressive outpouring of books, essays and newspaper

articles, continued to spend enormous amounts of time meeting the insatiable demands of the media, taught large numbers of both graduates and undergraduates at Columbia – scores of whom today teach at universities all over the world – and lectured to huge, rapt audiences on every continent.

Edward Said was an extraordinary figure, one who was truly appreciated in the academy and in arenas of cultural and intellectual life the world over. Like Noam Chomsky and very few others, he managed not only to reshape his own field of scholarly endeavor, but to transcend it, influencing other fields and disciplines, and going well beyond the narrow boundaries of the American academy to become a true public intellectual, and a passionate voice for humanistic values and justice in an imperfect world.

Rashid Khalidi
Columbia University

Annemarie Schimmel (1922-2003)

Honorary Fellow of MESA

Annemarie Schimmel, pre-eminent scholar in the study of Sufism, Indo-Muslim culture, Arabic calligraphy, and many other fields of Islamic studies, passed away January 26, 2003 at the age of 80.

Raised in Erfurt, Germany, Schimmel at an early age was attracted to Islamic culture, and when she was fifteen insisted that her parents get her a tutor so that she could learn Arabic. She earned two doctorates from German universities, the first from Berlin in Arabic and Islamic studies at the age of nineteen, and the second, ten years later, from Marburg in the history of religion. Her principal teacher in Islamic studies was Hans Heinrich Schaeder, while in religious studies she was particularly influenced by Friedrich Heiler, a Christian theologian who was fully alive to the experiential dimension of religion. Throughout her career, she combined a rigorous philological approach with the empathetic perspective of comparative religion. She was a master of Arabic (including serving as longtime co-editor of the Arabic journal *Fikrun wa Fann*) as well as Persian, Turkish, and a number of languages of the Indian subcontinent. Her interest in these "non-classical" fields made her a maverick in terms of German Orientalism, though she was fond of tracing the contributions of her predecessors such as Josef Hammer-Purgstall, Ernst Trumpp, Aloys Sprenger, and Friedrich Ruckert. Her commitment to comparative religion was recognized by her election as President of the International Association for the History of Religions (1980-1990). She was herself a poet both in English and German, and her translations of the poetry of Rumi, Iqbal, and even John Donne into German verse won wide recognition.