

## From the Editor

**This is the last issue of the *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*.** In Summer 2009, with volume 43, number 1, you will begin receiving the *Review of Middle East Studies*, the *Bulletin's* successor journal. More details about the reasons behind this change can be found in the previous issue of the *MESA Bulletin*, volume 41(2), pp. 121-124. A retrospective and celebration of the *Bulletin's* first four decades of publication formed a large part of volume 40 in 2006. Looking back at that volume, you can revisit parts of MESA's institutional history through interviews with its founders, read contemporary reviews of some of the most important books from the journal's past, and review selected cover art from past volumes.

The *MESA Bulletin* has thrived under a number of extraordinary editors, including I. William Zartman (1967-1968), D. A. Rustow (1969), Nicholas S. Hopkins (1973-1974), Richard W. Bulliet (1977-78), and the extraordinarily dedicated Jere Bacharach (1978-1992). When I first became involved with MESA, Jere's successor, Jon Anderson, was the *Bulletin's* editor (1992-1997), and he provided me with some of my first professional writing opportunities. Jon was succeeded by Ann M. Lesch (1997-1999), Daniel Goffman (1999-2003), and John VanderLippe (2003-2007). The existence and the survival of all manner of professional and civic organizations is due largely to the selfless contributions of time, creativity, and labor by public-spirited individuals such as these. Without them, and without the countless hours invested by the journal's writers and reviewers, the *Bulletin* would not have become the important professional resource it has been.

The field of scholarly publishing has been churning over the past two decades. Multiple waves of corporate consolidations in publishing, the closure of independent bookstores, reductions of financial and moral support for university presses and libraries, changes in copyright law, the tight job market for prospective faculty even in high-demand fields like Middle East studies, reductions in public support for higher education, and technological innovations have altered the way we plan, produce, and disseminate our work. The internet, in all its frenzied, chaotic glory, makes the instant denunciation of unpopular views by individual cranks and organized political interest groups all the easier. Novel legal challenges resulting from the peculiarities of British libel law (as in the recent cases of lawsuits filed or threatened against Cambridge University Press for its publication of Millard Burr and Robert O. Collins's 2006 book *Alms for Jihad*, and against the College Art Association for a disputed review of Gannit Ankori's 2006 *Palestinian Art*) threaten scholars around the world

with financial censure and silencing over issues that previously might have been settled in noisy and contentious, but far less repressive ways.

Changes in finance, technology, and law are also responsible for the nascent Open Access Publishing movement. Universities, research centers, and libraries across Europe and the United States have been experimenting, sometimes with the aid of research funding agencies and sponsoring governments, but often against considerable pressure by publishers and their trade associations, with allowing or requiring no-charge public access to certain categories of research. The rise of electronic-only scholarly publishing is also in its infancy. Within this new environment, the way we evaluate and reward the work of our colleagues will have to change as well. We hope that as the *Bulletin's* title changes and as its identity continues to develop, it can continue to be an important part of area scholarship.

### Reviewing Middle East Studies

In literary circles, book reviews have a mixed reputation. Although they form the core of important intellectual journals such as the *New York Review of Books* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, they are also liminal exercises, neither fully original creative works, nor mere informational summaries of the sort that are becoming more and more common as databases and search engines come to define the horizons of many kinds of knowledge production. Their writers sometimes inhabit equally marginal spaces. Reviewing books was the one of the few sources of income for the impoverished former student Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, the dark protagonist of Fyoder Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. William Burroughs, flamboyant American writer, exile, murderer, heroin junkie, and occasional resident of Tangier, once remarked that writing "prejudicial, off-putting reviews is a precise exercise in applied black magic," an observation that many of us, from one direction or another, might recognize very personally.

Such potentially disheartening elements of the professional review process are an unfortunate side effect of its manifest purpose: the self-conscious effort to nurture and improve area and disciplinary scholarship. As the *Review of Middle East Studies* is inaugurated this summer, we invite all of you to invest in the journal's future by contributing essays and reviews both large and small. Over the next several months, you will read retrospective evaluations of Edward Said's *Orientalism* at age thirty; examinations of the concept of "culture" in the Middle East; reflections on the culture of linguistic scholarship; retrospective essays by major area scholars on their early work; and our first comprehensive annual review article, on the scholarly literature regarding Jewish settlers in the occupied West Bank and Gaza.

Scholarly journals are only as good as the submissions they receive. We welcome your contributions, queries, and proposals. Write an essay outlining the institutional history and devastating closure of Leiden's Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM). Trace the impact of the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies on

Middle East scholarship. Tell us about the steps your institution has taken to adapt to the new media and publishing environment. Inform your colleagues in Political Science and Geography of the most important contemporary research trends in medieval history. Provide those of us who study Islam with a comparative review of current literature on confessional minorities in the region. Analyze the rhetoric of pseudo-scholarship in Middle East and Islamic studies (several popular books on jihad by self-taught experts sit on the shelves of the *Bulletin's* editorial office, awaiting evaluation by some responsible scholar). Propose and organize a theme issue on the topic of your choice.

To help get you started, you will soon find in the *MESA Newsletter* a Call for Papers for a future special issue of the *Review of Middle East Studies*, on the topic of "Ethics in Research, Publication, and Teaching in Middle East Studies." Plan to contribute to that issue.

And please, please, please: if we've sent you a book to review, read it. Savor it, question it, ruminate on it. And then write and submit your review. Black magic not required.

Gregory Starrett  
*Editor*