MEM Awards

Remarks by the Recipient of the 2015 MEM Lifetime Achievement Award
Given at the Annual Meeting of Middle East Medievalists
(Denver, 21 November 2015)

Richard W. Bulliet
Columbia University

(rwb3@columbia.edu)

I enrolled in Professor Giles Constable's seminar in twelfth-century European history in 1962, my first year of graduate study at Harvard. He told us to select a cartulary, which he told us was a term for a collection of medieval documents. We were to write a paper based on what we found there. I selected the cartulary of the Guillem family, the lords of Montpellier in southern France. I realized, given my haphazard memory of the Latin I had taken in high school, that I could not expect to read most of the documents. But I noticed that each document ended with a series of names of witnesses, and, the more important the document, the longer the list. Moreover, the names often included the witness' occupation and the name of his father. So I made the study of major witness families over a sequence of generations the core element of my paper.

Three years later, I decided to write my doctoral dissertation on medieval Nishapur, partly because my dissertation director, Professor George Makdisi, did not know or care much about the history of Iran. Professor Richard N. Frye, who would become the second reader of my dissertation, supplied me with manuscripts of the biographical dictionaries of Nishapur. The longest assemblage of names, however, was in a manuscript that was little more than an index of what had originally been a multi-volume work by al-Ḥākim al-Bayyiʿ al-Naysābūrī. So I had the full names, but no additional information about most of the individuals. It felt like a return to the witness lists in the Guillems cartulary.

By chance, during the preceding summer, my father, an electrical engineer, had enlisted my services gluing ads for electronic parts onto cards so that he could easily access items he might need. These were Royal-McBee Keysort cards, which had holes all around the sides. I never learned how my father coded and used the cards, but it occurred to me that if I copied every Nishapur biography onto such a card, I could code salient pieces of

information by turning holes into notches with a special punch. When I wanted to retrieve some bit of information, I simply had to run a knitting needle through a stack of cards, and the ones that had notches instead of holes fell out.

Computers, at that point, were still in a primitive stage but even if I had had access to a mainframe and knew how to use it, it would have required me to transliterate the Arabic into Latin letters. With the Keysort cards, I could copy the Arabic onto the card and not worry about transliteration. When I had finished copying and coding, I had thousands of cards that could be rearranged in any pattern I chose by the application of my knitting needle. Today, half a century later, I still use the cards to follow up on new thoughts as they occur to me. Without really intending it, in other words, I had created a large searchable database at a time when no one else was doing that sort of thing.

Professor Makdisi, who had taken over thesis direction in Islamic studies at Harvard after Professor H.A.R. Gibb suffered a stroke, never asked me how or what I was doing, nor did he express much interest in my work. We disagreed repeatedly on the origin of the *madrasa*, me favoring Khurasan and he insisting on Baghdad. Looking back, I realize that Gibb's forced retirement and Makdisi's unexpected succession as advisor created the opportunity for me to follow my own inclinations and devise my own research techniques.

Not having a mentor, or even a professor particularly interested in my research, would work to my disadvantage at critical points in the coming years. But the privilege of working entirely on my own, both methodologically and substantively, made up for those difficult moments. I was to make use of my cards and the coding system, which I extended to Isfahan and Jurjan, to write four books and a dozen articles.

It was in the summer of 1967, after returning home to Rockford, Illinois after an invaluable summer seminar at the American Numismatic Society, that I found myself drawing a blank when trying to remember the classical Arabic word for wheel. At first I was irritated at forgetting such a basic word, but then I thought that perhaps I had never encountered the word. How could that be? It then occurred to me that perhaps there had been no wheeled transport in the medieval Middle East (hence no formal term). But since oxcarts and chariots were well attested in antiquity, that would mean that the wheel had been abandoned sometime before the Arab conquests.

I shared the suspicion that I was onto something important with a senior colleague at Harvard. He replied that, were he not a friend, he would have stolen the idea. Thank goodness for friendship. I wrote an article arguing that wheeled transport had indeed been abandoned in favor of a more efficient means of hauling heavy loads in the form of the pack camel. To explain how this occurred as it did, I reconstructed a history of camel use based primarily on the evolution of saddle design.

Just as the Keysort cards on Nishapur kept me focused on the quantifiable aspects of Arabic biographical dictionaries, *The Camel and the Wheel* propelled me into a broader study of animal domestication and the technology of transportation. *Hunters, Herders, and Hamburgers: The Past and Future of Human-Animal Relationships* and

The Wheel: Inventions and Reinventions were the books that summarized my thoughts in these two areas. In *Cotton, Climate, and Camels in Early Islamic Iran: A Moment in World History*, I combined technology, camels, and the quantitative approach that I had pioneered in writing about Nishapur. I also published a number of articles on these subjects.

At this point, it seems proper to note that in pursuing these two widely diverse areas of research, I had departed irrevocably from the sort of Islamic studies I had been trained to carry out. By 1976, when I arrived at Columbia University, I had come to see classical Oriental studies as a scholarly enterprise that was long on painstaking perusal of classical texts but short on innovative thought. I benefited from the works of the Orientalists, of course, but quantitative history and the history of technology were wide open fields where I could ask new and important questions and hope to find answers.

The positive side of my pre-Columbia research and teaching was the freedom I had to go my own way. The negative side was the lack of mentorship and an awareness that the work I was publishing did not appeal to other scholars in the field. A member of the Columbia search committee who opposed my hire wrote in a private communication I happened across: "Bulliet has never written any real history and probably never will." Fortunately, the search committee as a whole disagreed. As for the dissenting opinion, it may not have been so far off for the time period. I find it ironic that my work is cited far more often today, when I am 75 years old, than it was in the twentieth century.

I resolved, on undertaking graduate instruction at Columbia, that my students would have carte blanche to follow their own inclinations in terms of subject matter and methodology, but that I would provide them with strong and active mentorship. I believe I have lived up to both commitments, but one consequence has been that I seldom schooled anyone in my approach to quantitative history, animal history, or history of technology. Of the forty-five doctoral theses that I have supervised at Columbia, about half dealt with topics before 1700 and half with later periods of history.

World history was a different story. I became an enthusiastic advocate. My involvement began in the 1970s in a still-born project to coauthor a world history textbook. The cash advance made the effort worthwhile, but the main payoff came when world history took off as a robust new disciplinary subfield in the 1980s.

The failed project had given me the experience to make the most of this trend. A successful co-authored textbook, *The Earth and Its Peoples: A Global History*, provided tangible success. But I also came up with the idea of a history of the twentieth century that would be topical and global rather than a rehash of World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War. *The Columbia History of the Twentieth Century* did not sell many copies, but it was a tremendously exciting project. Subsequently, I made a more strenuous effort to school my students on global history than I ever had on Nishapur, camels, or wheels.

Since my work did not fit the mold of old school Orientalism, I did not get carried away by the arguments for and against the celebrated redefinition of Orientalism developed by Edward Said, my colleague at

Columbia. Nevertheless, the dozen years I spent directing the university's Middle East Institute tarred me with the Orientalist brush. Said's strongest supporters felt that universities had no legitimate business studying policy matters or interacting with off-campus political and business entities. To their way of thinking, Middle East Area Studies was a tool for turning universities into havens of American neo-imperialism. Their hostility led to my removal from the directorship of the Middle East Institute in 2000. Though heartbreaking at the time, it freed me to do more writing and research. I also decided, before anyone had thought up the acronym MOOC (Massive Open Online Course), to archive the final presentations of my standard lecture courses and make them available for free on the Internet.

Looking back over my Middle East career, from first entering a classroom to hear Professor Robert Bellah lecture on Islamic Institutions in 1959 to the present day, I have few regrets concerning the lines of inquiry that I chose to pursue. But I do regret that the fields of Islamic Studies and Middle Eastern History have changed so little from where they were when I started out. True, tens of thousands of books have been authored, and no one today can possibly hope to keep up with these fields as they could in the 1960s. But the innovative methodologies that are showing such promise in the study of most other parts the world, such as quantitative history, climate history, and material history in general, are still little explored with respect to the Middle East. The Saidian attempt to slay the dragon of Orientalism produced a maelstrom of controversy, but it failed to open up viable alternative ways of doing business.

Alas, what failed to kill Orientalism has made it stronger.