

ments could "provide material for constituting an isolated individual consciousness . . . According to Bakhtin, idyllic narrative is marked by . . . continuity, cyclical movement, and the absence of rigid boundaries: precisely the major features of the movement before us.

It is difficult to take the force of "very" and "precisely" when the relation between the idyllic situation and Beethoven's notes is precisely what Kramer doesn't show us.

What am I saying? Only this: that there is no merit in treating a symphony as if it had a meaning or meanings. Symphonies do not mean anything, they can't mean anything, because notes are not signs; they do not participate in a code of signs. If in a furniture store I speak the word *chair*, the language being English, the word is a sign; it participates in a code of signs by referring to the class of objects upon which one sits. Beethoven's "Waldstein" Sonata has sense, but not meaning. Nattiez quotes Mikel Dufrenne saying that "one can engender sense with notes, if by sense we understand the expression proper to melody." True; except that there is more than melody in a piece of music, and "expression" encourages one to ask: "What, in the case of the 'Waldstein' Sonata, is expressed?" Water in a river makes sense, but it means nothing and therefore has nothing to say. If I claim that a piece of music means a lot to me, I may be telling the truth but only if I mean that I associate it with certain experiences which are or have been crucial to me. The only meaning the piece has is the meaning I have given it, an entirely personal attribution.

The problem is that we have a poor vocabulary for dealing with events. It is good enough for describing events if they can be thought of as objects but not if they must be construed as processes or actions. A performance of a symphony is an act, an event; it commands time by beginning with the present moment and, while it lasts, taking possession of the near future. It may, in addition, provoke and eventually appease my senses: my senses of hearing, movement, suspense, fulfillment, and so forth. A symphony does not live by meaning but by taking possession of time, of our attention during this duration of time. Its instruments of possession are sounds, rhythms, cadences, suspensions.

It may be asked: "Aren't the characteristics you have ascribed to music much the same as those we find in abstract ballets, abstract paintings, many of Barbara Hepworth's sculptures? And, if so, haven't critics found ways of describing these?" I'm not sure that they have. In all of these cases we need "language as gesture," not the language of denotation and reference. We need a discourse responsive to feelings which have not settled for the destiny of being named; feelings still amorphous, nomadic. The name is what kills. When Brendel tells me that Schubert's C minor Sonata is the most neurotic sonata Schubert ever wrote, I'm inclined to say: "Thanks a lot, I suppose."

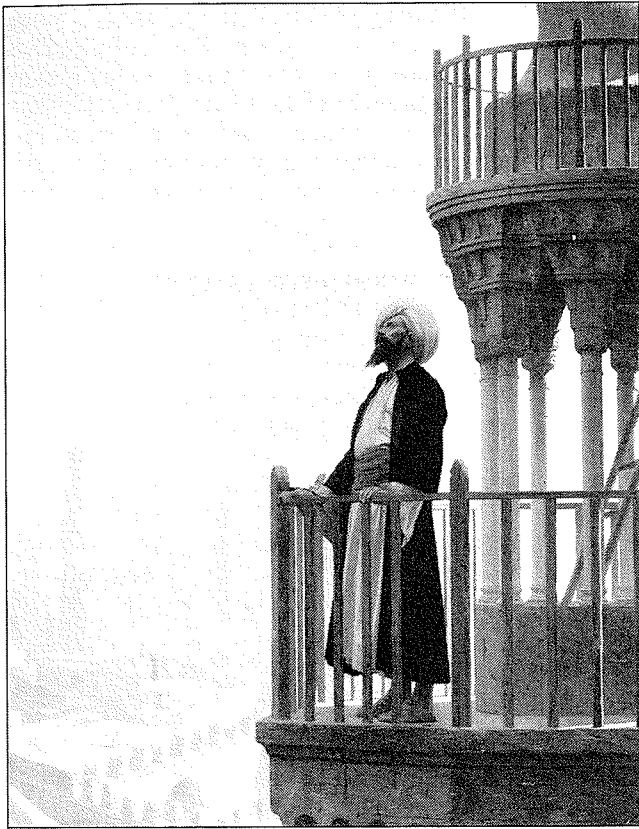
—*Denis Donoghue, currently a Fellow at the Wilson Center, holds the Henry James Chair of Letters at New York University.*

## *1001 Arabian Years*

**A HISTORY OF THE ARAB PEOPLES.** By Albert Hourani. Harvard. 551 pp. \$24.95

In his *Prolegomena to the History of the World*, the philosopher-historian 'Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) developed a theory of the relation of cyclic so-

cial renewal to state formation that still intrigues scholars and analysts. According to Ibn Khaldun, the earliest human societies were those of the hardy people of the desert and mountains, characterized by 'asabiya, their strong ties of kinship and group cohesion. The dynasties that those



desert people formed were also hardy and cohesive in ways that citified folk, who lacked *'asabiya*, could not achieve. But every dynasty bore in itself the seeds of decline, as rulers took up residence in cities, became corrupted by luxurious living, and degenerated into tyrants. In due course power would pass to a new group of men from the margins. Thus, wrote Ibn Khaldun, the Greeks and Persians had been replaced by the Arabs; and the Arabs, having founded an empire that stretched from Spain to the Indus valley, were in due course replaced by the Berbers in the West and the Turks in the East.

The moment of Arab physical dominance was, in actuality, surprisingly brief, lasting only from the mid-seventh to the mid-10th century. The territories conquered by Muhammad and a handful of nomadic tribes sweeping out of the Arabian Peninsula (the word "Arab" for Ibn

Khaldun and his contemporaries meant bedouin, and was synonymous with cruelty and barbarism) were much too vast to be ruled by a single administration. Within a generation the heirs of Muhammad were tearing at each other in factional strife; within two centuries the office of caliph was passing to local commanders and eventually to palace bodyguards—usually Turks from Central Asia. But in terms of language, religion, and, ultimately, civilization, the Arabs left a mark that would prove far more durable than their military feats.

Albert Hourani, Britain's pre-eminent historian of the Middle East, possesses an unrivaled authority to tell this story. *A History of the Arab Peoples* is the product of a lifetime's study, combining elegance with insight, compassion with urbanity. As a historian of ideas as well as events—his *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (1983) is considered to be the definitive study of modern Islamic-Arabist thought—he is able to

chart the often complex interaction between the religion of Islam and the Arabian societies over the centuries.

While Hourani is a pleasure to read, there is, however, a certain blandness about the Olympian detachment with which he views the passions that have shaped the Arab world. To the faithful, the origins of Islam are evidence of the supernatural erupting into history, but for Hourani the birth of Islam is a matter simply to describe. Those seeking a more ambitious analysis of the religious dimension must look to those emerging interdisciplinary, psycho-social disciplines, such as the history of religion itself. Hourani's *History of the Arab Peoples* is sweeping, old-fashioned narrative history, and its limitations are those of the genre.

Before Muhammad, the Arabian peninsula was crisscrossed by tribes warring with one another; the new Islamic religion

forged the bond, a kind of secondary *'asabiya*, that united those tribes and allowed them to direct their warlike fierceness outward. At first, Hourani shows, the Arabs spread faster and further than their religion, although eventually the opposite would be the case. By the end of the first Islamic dynasty (A.D. 750), less than 10 percent of the population of Iran and Iraq, Syria and Egypt, Tunisia and Spain were Muslim. Yet by the end of the 10th century, the proportion had increased substantially, reducing the Jews and Christians to small minorities. (The pressure upon them to convert came not from the "sword," as Christian polemicists used to maintain, but rather from the purse: Christians and Jews paid a special tax from which Muslims were exempt.)

During the next millennium, the Arabs united their sprawling domain through Islam and the *shari'a*, the system of law derived from the Qur'an. This unification was made easier because Islam was a religion of orthopraxy, in which proper social behavior counted for more than particular beliefs. A common Muslim identity thus created an international society which, for all its ethnic diversity, was remarkably homogeneous. "The canons of correct behavior and thought, of learning and high skills linked the generations," Hourani writes. "A network of routes ran through the world of Islam and beyond it. Along them moved not only caravans of camels or donkeys, carrying silks, spices, glass and precious metals, but ideas, news, fashions, patterns of thought and behavior." When the famous traveler Ibn Battuta (1304-1377) wandered from his native Tangiers to China and back, and from there to Spain and the Sahara, he everywhere met scholars with whom he could converse in Arabic. Though he travelled to distant lands, quite as if he were a native in them he would sometimes be appointed a *qadi* or judge, because of the "prestige attached to the exponents of the religious learning in the Arabic tongue."

The medieval period saw power in the Arab part of the Muslim world fall to a par-

ticularly hardy group of Turks, the Ottomans. The Ottomans, writes Hourani, were "one more example of the process which had taken place many times in the history of Muslim peoples, the challenge to established dynasties by a military force drawn largely from nomadic peoples." The Ottomans, however, ingeniously avoided the process of decline which Khaldun had described by shielding their bureaucracy and army from decadence. They invented a different type of *'asabiya* by relying upon slave officials who grew up in special households and upon janissaries, members of a special military caste recruited as boys in the Christian Balkans. Before the 19th century there is little sign that the Ottoman system of government, legitimized by the *shari'a*, was seen as "foreign" by most Arab peoples. The "common sense of belonging to an enduring and unshaken world created by the final revelation of God through the Prophet Muhammad" began to founder only when Western powers, with their vastly superior military and technical resources, penetrated Ottoman lands beginning in the 18th century. The slow, gradual importing of democratic ideas shaped some awareness that the Ottoman elites were of a different order from their Arab populations. This awareness, Hourani writes, intensified as the Ottoman Empire declined and later as the Young Turks introduced reforms quite alien to Arab traditionalism.

After 1918, the Ottoman Empire was replaced by Arab successor states whose leaders, from the secular nationalists in Egypt to the Hashemite family in Jordan and Iraq, pursued their own ambitions and agendas. Although the leaders of these nations have usually paid lip service to the ideal of Arab unity, the recent events in the Gulf reveal what happens when the universalist claims of both Arabism and Islam clash directly with the interests of the territorial states. When it came to the crunch, the heirs to pan-Arab, pan-Islamic ideas joined a coalition led by foreign infidels to uphold the sovereignty of a wealthy statelet with dubious claims to legitimacy. Ibn Khaldun likely would not have been

surprised by this; certainly Hourani is not. He points out that since the early 1960s there has been remarkably little change in most Arab regimes or in their policies. The degree of political stability in the region is remarkable and continues despite population explosion, rapid urbanization, the transformation of the countryside, and the continuous eruption of armed conflict. In Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Jordan, Tunisia, and Morocco, no substantial changes have been witnessed for more than a generation; in Libya, South Yemen, and Iraq, groups that seized control by 1970 were still in power two decades later. In all of the countries, the cohesion of the ruling group is still a decisive factor. What is the secret of this surprising stability? It seems the Khaldunian clans have mastered the peculiarly 20th-century *‘asabiya* of police

surveillance and military intelligence.

Hourani is not the first modern historian to have found in Ibn Khaldun a useful guide to Arab-Islamic history, with its distinctive blend of idealism and pragmatism, generosity and selfishness. Few historians, however, can match Hourani in his knowledge of the original sources, in his breadth of reading in the secondary literature, and above all in the facility with which he translates complex processes into readable English. Specialists will admire the book for the depth of its scholarship; the general reader, for its making the history of the Arabs so freshly accessible.

—*Malise Ruthven, a visiting professor of religion and history at the University of California, San Diego, is the author of Islam in the World (1984).*

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## NEW TITLES

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### *History*

**IN SEARCH OF HUMAN NATURE:** The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought. *By Carl N. Degler.* Oxford. 400 pp. \$24.95

Is that which is uniquely human about us something we are born with, or do we acquire it culturally? Pulitzer Prize-winning Stanford historian Carl Degler says this chicken-or-egg question actually has an answer, or several answers, all of which are determined by extra-scientific, political considerations.

At the turn of the century, Darwin was assumed to have proved that human moral and emotional capacities had evolved from animals, just as our physical shapes had. Seemingly harmless, this conclusion made it possible to cloak a good deal of ideology in the guise of science. Sociology textbooks used throughout the 1920s explained the "backwardness" of African-Americans genetically: "The negro," one such textbook declared, "is not simply a black

Anglo-Saxon deficient in school." Sociologists pronounced it "unscientific" to attempt to govern different races by the same system of legal rules. Sterilization laws were passed in America 25 years before they were in Nazi Germany: By 1930, some 30 states had enacted laws to prevent criminals, imbeciles, and rapists from passing on their "deviant genes."

During the 1920s, a reaction to this kind of thinking set in as progressive intellectuals attacked the very idea of human instinct. John Dewey and George Herbert Mead argued that nearly anyone could be taught nearly anything. By the 1930s, such arguments constituted the new scientific orthodoxy, and permeated the thinking of New Deal reformers, who saw different social groups' attainments as the result of favorable or unfavorable discrimination. If there was no such thing as human nature, then those who were socially—not inherently—disadvantaged should be helped.

In recent decades, however, Darwinism has made a comeback. Zoologists such as William Hamilton and sociobiologists such as E. O. Wil-