An Interview with Alastair Hamilton

CHIARA PETROLINI
University of Bologna

Alastair Hamilton has reshaped the history of how early modern Europe came to know—and often to misread—the Christian East and Islam. After early and influential work on the Radical Reformation, he turned to the first generations of European Arabic learning and to the Christian communities of the Arabic-speaking world, tracing the precarious traffic of ideas between Europe and the Middle East and the mediations—and the voices, whether of Arab Christians or of Muslims—that governed it: translation, confessional polemic, collecting. His books—including *William Bedwell the Arabist (1563–1632)* (1985), *Arabs and Arabists* (2021), and *The Copts and the West, 1439–1822* (2006)—have reconstructed the worlds in which figures like Erpenius, Bedwell, Abudacnus, Du Ryer and Wansleben worked, where the pursuit of knowledge was entangled with intra-Christian rivalries as much as with 'a lust of knowing'. They follow the allure of mistaken ideas, the ways inquisitors, missionaries and Arabists imposed coherence on fragments, and the lives of scholars and travellers who worked through mediation, translation and disguise. A recurring thread is the unstable labour of gathering and transmitting knowledge: how sources are weighed, how apocrypha and forgeries are sifted, and how persistent illusions arise from misreading. Hamilton has taught at Urbino, Leiden, Amsterdam, London and Cairo, and spent many years at the Warburg Institute; he also edits Brill's series 'The History of Oriental Studies'. His books and editions have given this history both a map and an archive, establishing a field in which Arabic Studies and the history of Eastern Christianity are read together, and in which misunderstandings are treated not as footnotes but as facts that made European knowledge what it was. He is now finishing a study of Western Christians and mosques, a subject that gathers his recurring concerns: trespass, curiosity, and the ethics of looking.

Your career runs from twentieth-century ideologies to heterodox devotion, then to Arabic and the European study of Islam and Eastern Christianity. If you had to draw one line through those twists and turns, what question have you been pursuing all along?

I could never claim to have been pursuing a single question, but there are certain themes that have always interested me. One is the strength of illusions and the attraction of ideas which are now generally considered to be mistaken. My first book was published in English under the title *The Appeal of Fascism*. My own choice was *The Fascist Illusion*, and this was the title used in the various translations—in Italian, French, Spanish—while *The Appeal of Fascism* was a title adopted on the insistence of the publisher. The question I asked myself was why a number of writers whom I admired should have been drawn by, or at least come to terms with, an ideology which I found intellectually contemptible. A similar interest drew me to the apocryphal book of 2 Esdras (4 Ezra), the subject of my *Apocryphal Apocalypse*. Of all the Old Testament

Cromohs (Cyber Review of Modern Historiography), ISSN 1123-7023, 28/2025

DOI: 10.36253/cromohs-16906

apocrypha 2 Esdras was the most obviously non-canonical. Compiled in about 90 CE, it contained Christian interpolations—Jesus is actually named—which were added considerably later. Yet, in the teeth of such overwhelming evidence, some of the greatest scholars of their day maintained that it was ancient, canonical and, as a work of prophecy, entirely reliable.

A further theme is the manner in which ideas can be distorted and manipulated. When I was working on the *alumbrados* I was struck by how the inquisitors tried to formulate a coherent doctrine from previous trials and fragments of conversation, and to impose this doctrine on the objects of their investigation. In my research on the Eastern Christians, and particularly the Copts and their relationship with the West, we see that Western missionaries would try to impose certain beliefs on the Eastern Christians, such as the doctrine of purgatory, of which the Eastern Christians did not have the slightest understanding.

The same applies to some early interpretations of Islam. On the one hand there were outright attacks, but on the other, there were efforts to show points that Islam had in common with Christianity. When I was working on the English Arabist of the early seventeenth century William Bedwell, I found that he presented a view of the religious beliefs of the great Muslim scientists in his apologies for the study of Arabic which would have been entirely acceptable to an Anglican readership. His technique was to detach a form of true piety from any association with the Prophet Muhammad. Their religion, he wrote, was free of 'the fables devised by the papists, free of the vain dreams of the delirious, free of the sophisms of the heretics'. The writings of the Arabic-speaking Christians, he went on, were perfectly compatible with Anglicanism since they too were entirely free of any of the beliefs of the Roman Catholics.

Your shift from heterodox devotion to the study of early modern Arabists and Eastern Christians marked a decisive turning point. Was it driven more by temperament, by intellectual necessity, or by a chance encounter? And how did it change your sense of what history itself could be about?

Neither temperament, nor necessity, nor a chance encounter. I had been interested in the Arab world for a long time, ever since my parents took me to East Africa when I was fourteen and I read illustrated editions of Edward Fitzgerald's *Ruba'iyyat* of Omar Khayyam and the *Arabian Nights*. When I was still at university I visited Morocco, and after I had left university I worked briefly in Tunisia. It was only much later, however, that I started to teach myself Arabic, and when I was in Leiden that I started to write about Arabists. In Leiden I benefited from its Arabic department and its connection with the Dutch Institute in Cairo where I occasionally lectured. I cannot say that my contacts with Arabists and Arabic studies changed my sense of what history was about, but they allowed me to gain a taste of a world which seemed to me infinitely fascinating.

You care about style. Do you see the writing of history as a literary craft in its own right—closer to the essay or even the novel than to the standardised

'research output'? And what have novels taught you about writing history that archives have not?

Yes, I certainly see 'history writing as a craft in its own right', but I would separate it from novels which I read to satisfy my curiosity and, sometimes, as models of style. This is something that I owe to my education in England. At Cambridge we had to write five essays a week, and even if I cursed the system at the time, I shall remain eternally grateful to it since it helped me to overcome inhibitions and to write effortlessly. When I was at university, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, English historians prided themselves on the elegance of their style, and on their accessibility to a broad reading public. Fortunately, as we see in the writings of Noel Malcolm and others, this tradition persists, but it also seems to me to be threatened. Although I was never a pupil of his—he was at Oxford when I was a student—I owe much to Hugh Trevor-Roper, above all as a stylistic model, but also because of the advice he gave me and his comments on an early article which I sent him. Style, it seems to me, is now becoming less and less important for historians, especially in America but also elsewhere. The prose of the younger American scholars is frequently dotted with neologisms, misnomers, grammatical mistakes and unnecessary repetitions, and jargons are used derived from other fields. The obscurity with which they express even the simplest ideas seems intended to convey a sense of profundity, but it means that their works are addressed to increasingly narrow readerships, and that an ever larger gulf is being created between popular history, the quality of which is not always high, and academic history which tends to be too specialised.

In your studies of Arabists and Eastern Christians you often reveal a history of mediation, translation, and disguise. How do you think historians should write the story of Christianity and Islam—as a conflict, a conversation, or something more entangled that escapes both frames?

As something more entangled. 'Mediation, translation and disguise' certainly come into it, and attempts were made to establish a dialogue. These attempts, however, do not appear to have got very far. An effort should be made to establish the points of view of both sides, but this is far from easy because of the scarcity of documentation illustrating the reactions of the Eastern Christians and the Muslims to visitors from the West. The result is inevitably one-sided. And then there is another factor which helps to account for this lack of documentation: the degree of importance which each side might attach to the same event. Western visitors tended to regard their mere presence in the East as an event of the greatest significance, whereas it seems to have passed completely unnoticed in the East. In the early modern period, there was hardly any interest in the West in the Islamic world. No notice was taken of the Western scholars trying to produce studies of Islamic beliefs and customs, and few Muslims other than diplomats and prisoners visited Europe. This begins to change in the second half of the nineteenth century when we find a passing reference by the Egyptian educationalist 'Ali Mubarak to Edward William Lane who had been compiling his great Arabic dictionary in Cairo in the 1840s with the help of Egyptian scholars.

We see something similar happening amongst the Copts. The first Jesuit mission intended to persuade the Copts to unite with the Church of Rome set out in 1561. It had the full approval of the pope and included some of the most distinguished members of the Society such as Cristóforo Rodríguez and Giovanni Battista Eliano. The latter was chosen because of his brief experience of Egypt and on the assumption that he knew Arabic. When they arrived in Egypt, however, it turned out that Eliano could neither understand nor make himself understood by the Coptic patriarch and his staff in Cairo or by the monks at the convent of St Anthony on the Red Sea coast. Although the missionaries achieved nothing their journey led to an intense correspondence between the envoys and Rome and, later, to publications criticising the Church of Alexandria. Eliano, on his return to Europe, was given a hero's welcome. He was offered a professorship in Paris, which he refused, but he accepted a chair in oriental languages in Rome. Yet the mission seems to have made no impression whatsoever on the Copts. Members of the Coptic clergy would occasionally arrive in Europe, usually in the hope of getting money, and their presence shows that they were entirely unaware of the disappointment and resentment in Rome caused by the failure of the missionaries. It was not until the end of the eighteenth century that a Coptic theologian, distressed by the conversion of one of his co-religionists to the Church of Rome and alarmed by the success of a new generation of Western missionaries, actually bothered to launch a theological attack on the teaching of the Catholics.

Among the many figures you have studied—say Abudacnus, Du Ryer, Wallin, Wansleben—what episode struck you most? And which character most amused you to work on, and why?

This is a difficult question to answer. If we except Wallin, who is relatively recent and whose life is well documented thanks to his letters and diaries, the sources for all the individual scholars I have studied—Abudacnus, Du Ryer, Wansleben, Heinrich Siecke, Claude-Etienne Savary and others—contain tantalising gaps. Little by little, often thanks to colleagues working on different scholars, fragments of new information come to the surface. Each fragment fills me with delight, but also with surprise. I have always tried to fill in the gaps with speculations based on what material I know. What surprises me is how mistaken most of these speculations turn out to be. In reply to the second part of the question I would again hesitate to draw up a hierarchy. Whenever I start working on a particular scholar, I have the same sense of anticipation and excitement. Since Wansleben is the figure on whom I have worked most recently, he is the one who fascinates me most at the moment, and of whom, one day, I would like to write a full biography.

You read everything. In recent history books, what recurring shortcomings strike you most—in style, in argument, or in the claims themselves?

There are, I fear, quite a number of shortcomings. There is a tendency particularly evident in volumes of collected papers, but also apparent in monographs dealing with

an individual scholar of the past, to concentrate exclusively on the scholar's works and to give no biographical information. This usually means that the subject of the book is treated in something of a vacuum. Another shortcoming is the title of many recent books on history. While the subject might be a single scholar, the scholar is sometimes not mentioned in the title, or, on occasion, even in the subtitle. This suggests, presumably for marketing purposes, that the scope of the book is far wider than it is—the Ottoman Empire in its entirety, for example, rather than one particular individual and his place in it. This is frequently attended, particularly among American historians, by great claims to originality and novelty, very few of which stand up to any scrutiny. But my greatest criticism is stylistic. There is a marked tendency, again particularly among American historians but also among certain Europeans, to adopt trendy interpretative theories which often have a jargon of their own. My experience of these theories is that they serve as a superficial veneer in an introduction and are then abandoned in favour of a more traditional approach. In my opinion they offer nothing whatsoever, but serve only to narrow the potential readership. By this I do not, of course, mean the discovery of new areas of research or new approaches which have proved immensely fruitful.

You have written about impostors, plagiarists, and 'trickster orientalists'. From Abudacnus to Wallin, what do such figures reveal about the fragility of erudition? And why do they fascinate you?

The European mastery of oriental languages was, obviously, a lengthy process. It would start with the alphabet and then, very gradually, progress to vocabulary and grammar. At each stage Western scholars, usually in perfectly good faith, would try to make sense of the available material. They inevitably made serious mistakes. One of the first scholars to tackle Coptic, Pierre-Victor Palma Cayet at the end of the sixteenth century, had studied the Coptic alphabet. As long as the characters had a clear Greek equivalent, he was largely correct. But he failed to understand the characters derived from the Egyptian hieroglyphs and he was incapable of separating one word from another. His efforts to transliterate a verse from the New Testament led to complete gibberish. But was he an impostor or simply a scholar making mistakes? The same can be said of Athanasius Kircher and his fanciful interpretations of the hieroglyphs. He is often regarded as a fraud, but at the time nobody in the West knew any better, so nobody could correct his erroneous speculations. In other respects he was a fine scholar. His theory that Coptic was a late derivation of Egyptian was dismissed at the time but was in fact perfectly correct. These are early examples of a phenomenon which stretches deep into the nineteenth century as European orientalists opened more and more fields. So where do we draw the line?

Orientalists have always been relatively few in number and few people outside their particular field have had enough knowledge to criticise them convincingly. This also applies to the discovery of previously unexplored geographical areas. A number of the reports by early explorers quite simply met with disbelief. When James Bruce returned from Ethiopia in 1773, claiming to have discovered the source of the Blue

Nile, he was disbelieved, but in fact he was telling the truth. Of the experiences of others we are not quite so sure. How reliable, for example, are Richard Burton and T.E. Lawrence?

The scope for invention in a generally unknown area with an equally unknown language was obviously immense, and the temptation to dazzle contemporaries with a display of knowledge which hardly anyone shared was sometimes irresistible and frequently aroused suspicion. A number of orientalists marked their experiences in the East with eccentricities such as continuing to wear oriental dress when they were back in Europe. And this raises another point. The adoption of oriental dress was part of an attempt to be assimilated in the eastern world and thus to be able to understand it and fathom its mysteries. But how often did this succeed? A number of Western travellers claimed that their Arabic was so good and their appearance in eastern dress so convincing that they could pass as Arabs, but there are also numerous reports by travellers who wore local clothes but admitted that nobody ever believed they were anything other than Europeans. One of their first objectives was to be as unobtrusive as possible and thus protect themselves in the streets from the insults, and sometimes the attacks, provoked by anyone wearing western clothes. In this they often succeeded, but the better-informed Western travellers were well aware of the fragility of their disguise. The Finnish Arabist Georg August Wallin, who had immersed himself in Egyptian culture and lived in Cairo as an Egyptian, said that he never really knew whether his Egyptian friends thought that he was indeed an Egyptian. They did, however, accept him and treated him as if he was one of them. His moment of greatest satisfaction was when he entered a mosque and realised that he was so unobtrusive that nobody took any notice of him.

In the case of a scholar such as Claude-Etienne Savary, the late eighteenth-century translator of the Qur'an, I believe that we can indeed talk of plagiarism and trickery. I found him interesting for that very reason. To trace his sources was an intellectually satisfying challenge. But, of the Arabists I have studied, he is something of an exception. In the early modern period some degree of plagiarism appears to have been inevitable and was usually acceptable. Travellers would rely on the works of their predecessors when they completed their descriptions of monuments observed in haste or when they added information about places they had been unable to visit. Some would acknowledge their sources, but no objection seems to have been taken to those who did not.

What did you gain from the Warburg Institute—habits of reading, personal encounters, ways of making associations—that have stayed with you?

When I look back on the years I spent at the Warburg I realise that what I miss most are certain colleagues and the students. I had always enjoyed teaching, but, at the Warburg, the standard of the students, who were anyhow MA students rather than undergraduates, was far higher than in any of the other universities in which I had taught. I always maintained that I learned more from the students than they did from

me, and this was particularly true of the Warburg. In the past I had refused to give the same course twice, but at the Warburg I gave the same course, on the Reformation, for almost fifteen years, and each time, thanks to the questions the students asked and the observations they made, I felt that I had learnt something more about the subject. The questions they asked, moreover, were always different.

But I also learnt from colleagues—above all from Jill Kraye who was then the librarian, but also from Charles Hope, the director when I arrived, and Charles Burnett. They were generous with their advice and their assistance, and Jill Kraye would correct meticulously the articles I wrote for the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*. She improved them greatly.

You have lived and taught in England, Italy, the Netherlands, and Egypt. What did each of these places give you, through your students and colleagues? Did the way of doing history itself look different in Cairo, London, Rome, or Leiden?

My career as a historian started late, well after I had left university, and there was only one city where I had any discussions about methods of writing history. That was Rome. I was working on *The Appeal of Fascism* in the 1960s, and, as I did so, I developed a close friendship with Piero Melograni and Renzo De Felice. It was they who introduced me to the ideas on history of Karl Popper's *Poverty of Historicism*, and I found that his scepticism made perfect sense. From Renzo De Felice I also learnt about the integrity of a historian. Everything should be sacrificed to accuracy. No deadline imposed by a publisher should be observed if further documents had, or might, come to light. And one should have no fear of revealing facts that were sufficiently documented, however unpopular they might be. Renzo De Felice was extraordinarily courageous, and chose to polemicise on a highly sensitive terrain. When I finished *The Appeal of Fascism* I decided that I had had enough of the twentieth century and should turn to an earlier period and a different area, but the courage and integrity of De Felice, despite his political sympathies which I did not always share, remained an ideal.

Later, when I started to work on the *alumbrados*, I owed much to my conversations in Madrid with Eugenio Asensio and in Paris with Marcel Bataillon. Hugh Trevor-Roper introduced me to John Elliott, the greatest expert on Spanish history in England, who was then teaching at Cambridge, and through him I met younger historians who all influenced me in some way. In Holland I was always indebted to the advice of Herman de La Fontaine Verwey and Paul Valkema Blouw. It was thanks to Valkema Blouw that I became aware of the world of clandestine printers in the Netherlands, their use of fake addresses and more or less anonymous typefaces. His extraordinary eye and memory enabled him to redate a large number of heterodox publications including those of the Family of Love, and, with his encouragement, I incorporated them in my work

Where my work on Arabists is concerned I was initially guided by Jan Brugman, the professor of Arabic at Leiden, and I relied heavily on colleagues such as Jan Just

Witkam and, later, Arnoud Vrolijk. I also learnt much from younger scholars who have since become my closest friends—from Robert Jones, whose doctoral thesis I followed closely, from Maurits van den Boogert, who was a student of mine at Leiden, and from Jan Loop who came to my lectures at the Warburg Institute. All my guides and advisors had a preparation far more specialised and far superior to my own.

After Brexit you 'repudiated' England. How has living in Italy altered your scholarly ear—your sense of audience, irony, even your choice of subjects?

In fact I repudiated England long before Brexit. My mother was Italian. I was brought up bilingual and I always spent the summer in Italy with my Italian relatives. My wife is Italian and I have probably spent more of my life in Italy than anywhere else. As soon as I left university I decided, for various reasons, that I wanted to live and work abroad, as far away as possible from the xenophobia, nationalism and hypocrisy that ultimately bore fruit in Brexit and the series of ghastly governments which ensued. I lived and worked in Tunis, New York, Berlin and Rome, with no attachment to a university, and I came to feel myself deeply European.

Since Italy was the country where I started teaching and the students at the University of Urbino were my first audience, I learnt from them. Above all I learnt that they must never be bored—and they got bored very easily. It was in an effort to keep them permanently entertained that I developed a technique of lecturing without notes and of trying to engage with the audience. Nevertheless I would hesitate to say that Italy affected my choice of subjects. Although I have done a certain amount of work in Italian archives and libraries, especially when I was working on Fascism in Rome, it hardly compares to the work I have done in the Netherlands, Spain, France and England. In my approach to history, however, I have always felt that I was part of an essentially pragmatic English tradition.

After so many books on heterodox devotion, Arabists, Eastern Christians, and travellers, what are you working on now? And what sort of problem still has the power to tempt you into a new project?

At the moment I am trying to finish a book on Western Christians' experiences of mosques. For part of the early modern period mosques, especially those closed to non-Muslims, were a challenge similar to the Holy City of Mecca. When and why did Western Christians start to take an interest in them? How did they cope with the strict prohibition to enter them in parts of Syria, Palestine and Egypt? How unobtrusive did they manage to be in order to do so? And how was it that they ended up by restoring sacred Islamic buildings and even designing them themselves? For many of their exploits they relied on disguise and fake identities. Their description of monuments which have either been destroyed or restored beyond recognition can sometimes be of use to art historians, while their reactions reflect both the changes of taste which we find in the West from the Renaissance to the late nineteenth century and the growing interest in Islam.