NOTES AND COMMENTS

A REPLY TO PAUL STARKEY’S REVIEW OF IN A SEA OF KNOWLEDGE: BRITISH ARABISTS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY (ITHACA PRESS, 2002)

LESLEY McLOUGHLIN

In his review, Paul Starkey questions my “almost obsessive emphasis” on the role of the Middle East Centre for Arab Studies (MECAS). My book evaluates in a few pages the contribution MECAS made to the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language and puts it in an international context, which is ignored in the review. Notably, MECAS benefited from contact with American universities and with the Foreign Service Institute (FSI). The book makes clear the many connections with American universities and other institutions, governmental and otherwise.

Starkey questions my use of asterisks in my bibliography to note that the author “studied or taught at MECAS.” The total of such works, related to the Arab world, is around sixty, but Starkey has reminded me to add a few more. I did not do justice to all the Americans who studied at MECAS, including Professors John Esposito and Fred Donner. MECAS taught only one American diplomat, but Ambassador Christopher Ross acquired such excellent Arabic that after 9/11 he became the U.S. government spokesman on Al Jazeera television.

Starkey has detected “sleaze” in my book, that is, salacious gossip. Let me assure the readers of this journal that when I consider what I wrote I am amazed—as Dr. Johnson may possibly have said—at my own moderation.

Starkey is further unhelpful to American and international readers because he gives no indication that the starting point of my book is Orientalism by the late Professor Edward Said. Throughout my book there are many corrections to Said’s work.

I am accused of complacency by Starkey in my remarks about the funding of Arabic studies in Britain. A student of Arabic in 1900 was indeed a rara avis. In the next 100 years, as my book shows, the British government intervened several times to promote the study of Arabic at the university level. Other sources of funding have also become available, the result being that Britain in 2005 has a dozen universities that teach Arabic. Some universities, such as Durham, where Starkey teaches, may be justly apprehensive; but the university system overall looks ready to provide for the ever increasing demand for Arabic. Exeter, indeed, has recently been advertising for more teaching staff.

Starkey makes several groundless challenges to my conclusions. He alleges that in my survey of British university teaching in 2000, I relied only on answers to a questionnaire. That would have been foolish because Oxford University and the School of Oriental and African Studies failed to answer, despite repeated reminders. My survey is based on much more than the simple questionnaire that I sent out.

Finally, Starkey considers me an “Arabist with a distinguished teaching and interpreting career,” but he might have mentioned also that I have published several translations.
from modern Arabic literature and produced three works on the modern history of the
Arab world. He might also have mentioned a small contribution I made to the teaching
of Arabic at all British universities. It was, incredibly, not a requirement for British
university students to study abroad for a year until 1985, when I arranged the funding
for a British director of studies to be based at the University of Alexandria in Egypt to
supervise the year abroad. Mine is not the entire credit, however. A friend alerted me to
the need for funds. Through another friend I persuaded an Arab philanthropist to finance
the position. Both friends had been students at MECAS.