In memoriam Joseph N. Bell (1938-2020)*

On February 2, 2020, Joseph Norment Bell, co-founding editor of the *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, died peacefully at the age of 81. A year after he passed away, it is time to look back on his life, a life that began in Richmond, Virginia, on the 21st of April 1938.

Bell spent his childhood in the rural community of Hampden-Sydney College. His father was a professor with a specialization on the golden age of French drama in the 17th century, his mother devoted to opera.

Though highly talented, ambitious and curious, the student never finished his bachelor’s degree—a little promising start into an academic career, but perhaps rather typical of Bell’s unconventional nature and approach to the world. He had gone for a junior year in Paris to the Sorbonne and the École Nationale des Langues Orientales Vivantes, but ended up spending two years learning Arabic there from 1958 to 1960. He wrote back to Davidson College in North Carolina and asked if they could somehow allow him to continue with Arabic to complete his BA degree. They replied that the closest language they could offer him would be Hebrew. Then he applied to the graduate college at Princeton. He was accepted without a BA. In 1963 he completed his MA at Princeton in Oriental Studies and then began his research for a PhD. For five years, he worked at the University of Chicago, the last two years as an instructor in Arabic—a job that seems to have distracted him from, or delayed him in, following the path of his dissertation for some time. Nevertheless, he managed to complete it, at Princeton, in 1971.

After his PhD, he spent two years as a lecturer of Arabic at the University of Ghana. Other academic destinations that followed were the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), the State University of New York at Binghamton, and the American Research Center in Egypt.

During a long residence in Egypt he acquired great fluency in colloquial Arabic. He used to park his car in an underground garage in downtown Cairo and arranged for the manager to teach him a different Egyptian joke every day. This considerably expanded his knowledge of colloquial Egyptian Arabic.

At that time when J. N. Bell came to the University of Bergen, there was research on the Middle East going on in several disciplines of the Humanities and Social Sciences at the

* The following obituary builds on, and is partly compiled from, material kindly made available to me by J.N. Bell’s wife, Ludmila Torlakova, an obituary written by his brother Herman, and another by his colleague at Bergen University, Knut Vikør, the latter first published in Norwegian in PåHøyden – Nyhetsavisen for Universitetet i Bergen, February 14, 2020, <https://pahoyden.no/minneord-joseph-n-bell-1938-2020/461564>. By courtesy of the authors and På Høyden.
University, but there was no instruction in the languages of the region. It was this need that brought him to Norway. The Faculty hired him in 1982, and he stayed until his retirement in 2008. In 1985 he became professor of Arabic Language and Culture—by appointment of King Olav V of Norway, who had received a detailed request from the scholar in 1983 and responded favourably.

Joseph (J. Joe) Bell soon became the driving force behind the establishment of Arabic and Middle Eastern languages as a teaching subject and the systematic further development of Middle Eastern Studies for which an urgent need was felt from the 1970s. He had extensive knowledge of several Middle Eastern languages, in addition to Arabic, which he spoke fluently and almost without accent. He therefore quickly embarked on an extensive teaching program, probably more ambitious than the faculty originally intended, and showed great enthusiasm and energy in building Bergen as a centre for linguistic and philological Middle East studies as well. So committed was he to his ambitious goals that he often met wonder in a Norwegian system that did not always take heed of his American go-to will. But he never took ‘no’ for an answer, and most often his plans got carried out. His enthusiasm was contagious.

Bell also participated in close professional collaboration with colleagues in the Middle East environment, contributed their studying of Arabic source texts, and supported translators and editors. He also had extensive international cooperation, a result of which was the foundation, in 1995, together with Petr Zemánek of Charles University in Prague, of the Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies, which was online and open access—a new phenomenon at that time.

The focus of Joseph’s academic work was mystical love in Islam. His earliest publication in this field, and at the same time probably the book he was best known for, is his doctoral dissertation, *Love Theory in Later Hanbalite Islam* (Albany 1979). This study focuses on the ideas about love held by Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim, both usually considered ‘rigid’ jurists of the 14th century. J. N. Bell, however, linked their thinking about love to Sufi understandings of the ‘love for God.’ The work concludes with a comparative analysis of concepts of love in Christianity and Islam. The book has also been translated into Turkish and is available with the title *Islam’da Aşk Tasavvuru*. Later he followed up the theme in an edition and commented translation (together with Ḥ. M. ‘A. al-Shāfī’i) of the *Kitāb ʿaff al-ʾalāf al-maʿlūf ʿalā ‘l-lām al-maʿṭūf* by Abū’l-Ḥasan ‘Ali b. Muḥammad al-Daylamī, published under the title *A Treatise on Mystical Love* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2005 = Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies Monograph Series, vol. 1).

Among his earlier, and at the same time most popular works was his translation of the remarkable Egyptian novel, *The Seven Days of Man* (**Ayyām al-ʾīnsān al-sabʿa**, 1969), by ‘Abd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim (1935-1990), first published in Bergen in 1983 and later in Evanston, Illinois, 1996. About the novel, Bell himself wrote:

This novel is considered to be one of the finest works of the Arabic novel tradition as well as an invaluable social document. Its framework is the seven days it takes a group of Sufi brothers in a village of the Egyptian delta to prepare for their annual visit to Tanta and the *mawlid* of their saint, Sayyid al-Badawi. The seven days, being the same seven as that of God’s creation of the world, makes the village a microcosm of the universe. The translation of
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this ‘anthropological novel’ is the result of years of careful study and revision, in collaboration with the author of the novel […]

Select bibliography

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Earlier obituaries


For the editors of the Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies
Stephan Guth, IKOS, University of Oslo, Norway

1 <https://org.uib.no/smi/meb/books.html#JNSe>.