

**STUDIES IN
ISLAMIC POETRY**

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Studies in Islamic Poetry by Reynold Alleyne Nicholson

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STUDIES
IN
ISLAMIC POETRY

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CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS

1921



TO

EDWARD GRANVILLE BROWNE

WHOSE TEACHING AND EXAMPLE FIRST
INSPIRED ME TO PURSUE THE STUDY OF
ORIENTAL LITERATURE

PREFACE

WRITTEN during the war, these Studies grew out of the wish to impart some things I have enjoyed in Arabic and Persian not only to fellow-students, who can correct me if I misinterpret, but also to others who without being specialists are interested in the literature, philosophy and religion of the East. Since the five essays fall into two distinct groups, it has been decided to publish them in two volumes bearing different titles, namely, *Studies in Islamic Poetry* and *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*. The latter comprise (1) an account of the famous Persian Şúfí, Abú Sa'id ibn Abi 'l-Khayr—dervish, abbot, saint, and reputed poet—drawn from documents singularly rich in detail which shed a rather disillusioning light upon his character; (2) a study of 'Abdu 'l-Karím al-Jilí's treatise entitled *al-Insán al-Kámil* or "The Perfect Man," a very curious exposition of the Mohammedan Logos doctrine by a Muḥyawí, *i.e.* one whose modes of thought are derived from Muḥyi'ddín Ibnu 'l-'Arabí; (3) an essay on the Odes of Ibnu 'l-Fáriḍ, which unite mysticism with poetry of the rarest kind, but are so veiled in allegory that a glimpse of the meaning underneath is sometimes as much as we can obtain.

The present volume is devoted to belles-lettres. Professor Browne's edition of the *Lubábu 'l-Albáb*, the anthology compiled by Muḥammad 'Awfí, gave me an opportunity of trying what could be done with Persian court-poetry. In this field all the flowers are not roses, and the roses are artificial; yet with no disparagement to their beauty, so exquisite is the art. Abu 'l-'Alá al-Ma'arrí was an old friend, whose pessimism made hours of gloom seem cheerful by contrast; and I believed that many would appreciate a version of selected

passages from his *Luzúmiyyát*. English readers have not yet had this work put before them in a recognisable form: they will see that it is not in the least like the "quatrains" which it has inspired. My essay should be read as a supplement to the monograph by Alfred von Kremer in the Proceedings of the Vienna Academy (1889). That, indeed, is worthy of its theme, and one can scarcely imagine that it will ever become obsolete. But with all its brilliancy and charm I doubt whether it does justice to Ma'arrí's genius. Von Kremer seems to have forgotten that poetry is not philosophy and that the *Luzúm* is pre-eminently the work of a literary man. His attention was fixed upon the ideas, consequently he did not examine the language and style with sufficient closeness to detect the subtle manner in which the poet at once disguises and proclaims his unbelief in the Mohammedan or any other revealed religion. I have broken new ground and endeavoured to widen the perspective. However my conclusions may be regarded, they are based on the best evidence, that of the author's writings, though it is avowedly disingenuous. Of the examples in English, including four which Mr Fisher Unwin has given me leave to reprint from my *Literary History of the Arabs* (1907), comparatively few coincide with the pieces chosen by Von Kremer. The appendix containing their text will serve, I hope, as an introduction to Arabic poetry for students who may find the pre-Islamic odes too difficult at first or fail to acquire a taste for them. Concerning the principles and methods which I have followed in translating, the choice of metres, the value of rhyme, etc., a good deal might be said; but as argument about such questions is apt to end in the sort of agreement recommended by Evenus—

σοὶ μὲν ταῦτα δοκοῦντ' ἔστω, ἐμοὶ δὲ τάδε—

it will be enough to say that the verse-translations are not unduly free and should be of use to readers of the original Arabic and Persian. While the mystical poems often need a

commentary, in other cases the aim has been to select typical extracts which for the most part explain themselves.

I cannot send forth this book without some reference to what has helped me to write it. Thirty years have now passed since I began to read Persian with Professor E. G. Browne. Looking back over that period, I recall his constant sympathy, his ever ready encouragement and support, with feelings which are beyond my power to express. By dedicating these Studies to him I would pay tribute to a great Orientalist and more especially acknowledge, in a way that will not displease him, my personal debt of gratitude and affection.

REYNOLD A. NICHOLSON.

October, 1920.