

Butrus Abu-Manneh (1932–2018): Ottoman Historian, Pioneering Historiographer



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ON 24 DECEMBER 2018, Ottoman historian and pioneering historiographer Butrus Abu-Manneh died at his home in Haifa, aged eighty-six. Abu-Manneh, who taught for three decades at the University of Haifa, trained generations of historians, scholars, and researchers, both Jewish Israeli and Palestinian. Abu-Manneh was one of the first Palestinian citizens of Israel to establish himself in the Israeli academy. As such, he was a trailblazer who contributed much to the renewal of Palestinian intellectual life following the Nakba and the near disappearance of the Palestinian intelligentsia from most of Palestine's coastal cities. He was a central figure in the historiography of the late Ottoman Empire, challenging some of the conventional and accepted fallacies of Middle East studies with his primary source research.

Born in 1932, Abu-Manneh grew up in Ramla. In the aftermath of 1948, his family moved to Lydda, and soon thereafter to Jerusalem, ending up in Haifa, where Abu-Manneh lived until his death. As a student in the Department of Middle East History at Hebrew University in the mid-1950s, young Abu-Manneh was introduced to Ottoman history, and it was to that broad topic that he devoted the rest of his academic life. After a stint teaching high school in Jaffa, he enrolled at St. Antony's College, Oxford, to pursue graduate studies. Under the supervision of renowned Middle East historian Albert Hourani, Abu-Manneh wrote his dissertation on the Ottoman province of Syria during the late Tanzimat period.

Upon returning to Haifa in 1971, he joined the Department of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at the University of Haifa. His commitment to teaching and to active research made him an ideal lecturer and a beloved teacher. He was widely read and yet modest, approachable, and always willing to help; his students rate among some of the best scholars in Palestine and Middle East history. In 1979, he became head of the department and joined the university's Graduate Studies Authority as a member of its doctoral committee. He remained at Haifa University until his retirement in 2000.

The history of the Ottoman Empire, especially the late Ottoman period, remained Abu-Manneh's lifelong pursuit—in particular the nineteenth-century governmental reforms of the administrative and judicial systems known as Tanzimat. Based on extensive research of primary sources, Abu-Manneh was able to challenge the dominant view of late-Ottoman history in Middle East studies, showing that the reforms were driven by internal consideration and needs, and not simply undertaken at the behest of European powers that “demanded” them. Writing about his research with fairness and

objectivity, he laid bare the positive workings of the late Ottoman state and demonstrated how deeply consequential the reforms were for both Ottoman society and the modern Arab states that had been provinces of the empire. As one of the few academics in Israeli and Palestinian academic institutions who could read Ottoman Turkish, he was able to glean history from the inside and develop an in-depth understanding of the social and political processes at work during the late Ottoman era.

His study and engagement with that period of history was quite broad. Alongside Ottoman state policy, he explored related topics such as the Nahda (the revival of Arabic literature and language in the late nineteenth century) in Greater Syria, as well as Sufism, particularly the Naqshbandi order, and the Jerusalem District in the 1800s. In 2001, Abu-Manneh published his last and most important book in the field, *Studies on Islam and the Ottoman Empire in the 19th Century (1826–1876)*.

Abu-Manneh was first and foremost a social historian who believed that only through the study of society and social dynamics can we understand larger historical and political events. He was an expert archivist whose reliance on primary sources took him to state archives everywhere, especially in Israel and Istanbul, for weeks or months at a time. He pioneered the use of the *sijil*, the records of Palestine's Ottoman shari'a courts, as a fundamental primary source. These records contain rich historical material describing daily life in various cities, and it was this scholarly endeavor that made Abu-Manneh one of the most well-known and important historians of his generation.

He taught his students how to derive useful material from this important source, and also initiated a transformation in their understanding of Palestinian urban society toward the end of the Ottoman era and during the period of the British Mandate. He undertook a good deal of research on the so-called *a'yan* (notable families) of Jerusalem and Nablus, writing about the Husseinis in late Ottoman and early Mandate times.

As a scholar, Abu-Manneh inherited the mantle of a generation of Palestinian historians who rose to prominence during the Mandate, figures such as A'rif al-A'rif, Ihsan al-Nimir, Izzat Darwaza, Akram Zu'aiter, and Ahmad Samih Khalidi, among others. He elevated Palestinian historiography to a more scientific and academic level, one that also garnered greater recognition internationally. He published mainly in English, and occasionally in Arabic and Hebrew. He lectured internationally during periods of residence in the United States, Germany, and other countries, and exposed many researchers to his particular field of endeavor.

On a personal note, I should add that I had the honor and good fortune to be one of Abu-Manneh's students. My dissertation on Safed in the Mandate period was written under his supervision. I learned a great deal from him, both academically and personally, not least the importance of loving all of mankind regardless of religion, ethnicity, or gender. One of Abu-Manneh's two sons, Bashir, continues in the academic tradition as the director of the Centre for Colonial and Postcolonial Studies at the University of Kent.

About the Author

Mustafa Abbasi is an associate professor in the department of Galilee Studies at Tel-Hai College. His research focuses on two main fields: the history of the 1948 war in the four Galilee cities and the rural population therein; and the social history of the Palestinian Arab population from the late Ottoman period to the end of the British Mandate.