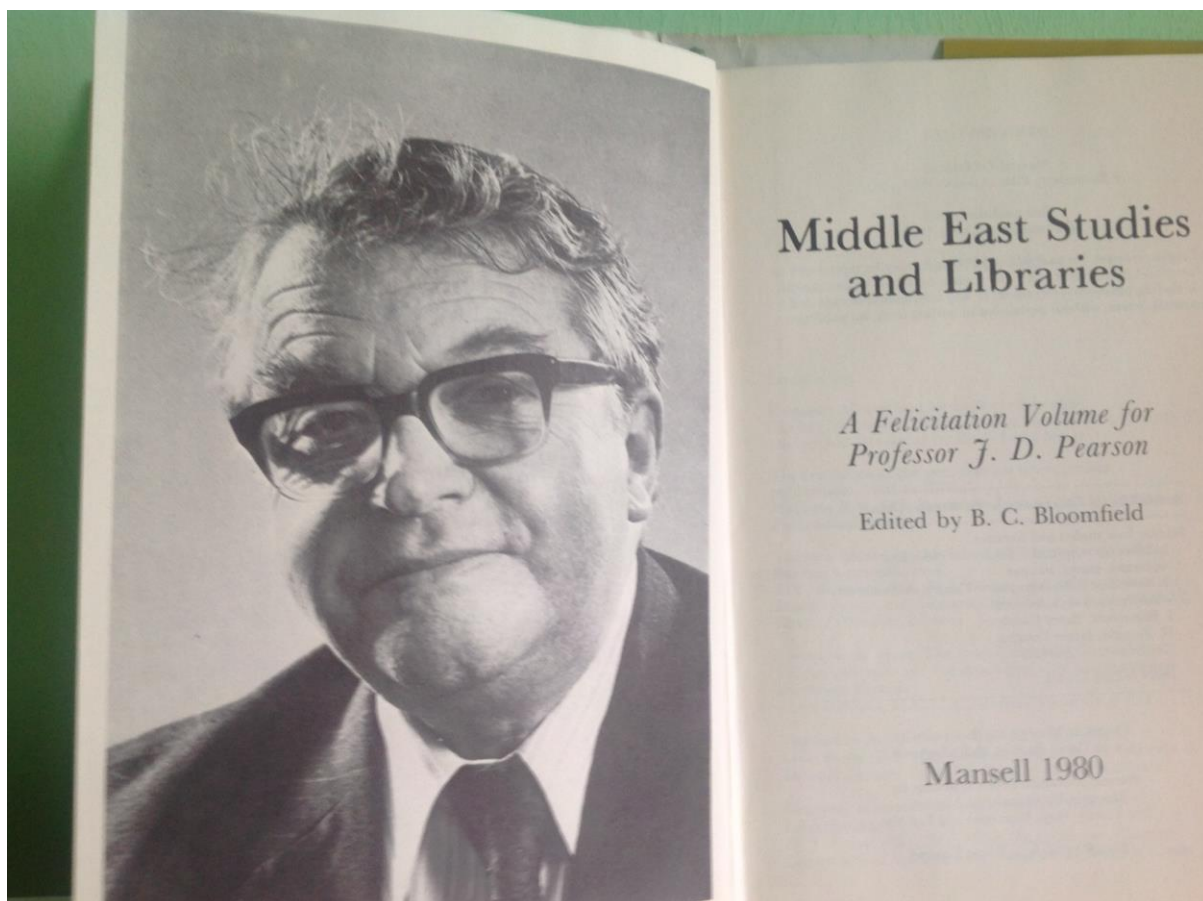


Melcom Memories

Derek Hopwood

I am pleased to recognize 50 years of Melcom. Although many of the original members are no longer with us, Melcom is still flourishing. It is fitting that we meet in Cambridge where we held our first meeting and our first conference. Also our founder was very much a Cambridge man (and boy).



James Douglas Pearson (1911-1997) was a librarian and bibliographer almost his whole life. Traditionally, European bibliographers were lone scholars – men such as Brockelmann, Gabrieli, Sezgin. Several were cataloguers who made great collections of MSS available to researchers. They worked at the height of Orientalism. Pearson was equally dedicated but was keen to get others to help him and to co-operate wherever possible. He became a librarian in Cambridge University Library and then in SOAS. In 1961 he was invited to advise the Hayter Committee which was to report on the future development of Asian and African studies in British Universities. Pearson recommended an expansion in library provision for Middle Eastern studies and other subjects which he thought could be best achieved by co-operation to ensure as wide a coverage as possible.

He saw co-operation as scholars and others working together in a convivial atmosphere. Perhaps he recognized this as a way of compensating for some of the repetitive drudgery of bibliographical and library work. I believe he did. His obituary said:” He is almost equally well remembered for his good fellowship, love of good food and drink, globe- trotting, and his sensible and productive ideas for forwarding the work of committees”. He inspired them (and us) to do as well as possible.

Bibliographers do want completeness for its own sake but also to be as helpful as possible for other scholars. After all the aim of bibliography is to smooth the path for scholars in their own research. This aim Pearson combined with satisfaction in achievement. It was a way of life and an end in itself as we could complete our schemes almost in a vacuum – i.e. despite all the problems of the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Pearson led us in co-operative ventures in Middle Eastern bibliography. This led me to ponder on our relationship - i.e. the relationship of bibliographer or librarian -to Middle Eastern studies. Some of us come from the area or have a connection with it. Others chose Oriental studies as a subject in which languages and religions are important. They become Orientalists. Others develop an interest in the problems of the Middle East as perhaps representative of universal problems, for example oil, society or modernization. Or they take an interest in local problems, for example that of Palestine.

However, some librarians do not go beyond the title page of the books in their hand, but I do believe it is important to take an interest in the contents – as it certainly adds interest to one work.

Interest in the Middle East has changed radically over the past 50 years. At the time of Hayter Europe was just emerging from the age of empires, the Middle East from its colonial background. Many adjustments needed to be made in attitudes and motives. Then, few people in Europe or America knew about the Arab world or Islam – nowadays it is impossible to ignore them.

I think that we have to be interpreters, perhaps go-betweens, or at least we are responsible for the subjects we study.

Melcom (which I take as representing Middle East studies) there was from the beginning a certain feeling of responsibility through teaching, research and the provision of library and archive materials. Because we were few and our subject was large, co-operation was beneficial. Collective projects (in any field) can in any case be satisfying. While many scholars are isolated – concerned with reputation and achievements – we gained satisfaction in helping and preparing the ground for others. We were interested in the exchange of information and experiences – even companionship in a subject in which one could feel isolated.

There were, I believe, at least three factors in Melcom’s success:

- i) Professional pride
- ii) Interest in the Middle East in general
- iii) Fruitful interaction and co=operation

Melcom is a co-operative body made up of different individuals – in the beginning several British (and other) scholars and librarians with interest in and experience of the Middle East. I remember R.B.Serjeant- expert in Gulf sailing who had served in Aden

Robin Bidwell – a gloriously eccentric scholar who had served in the military in Aden

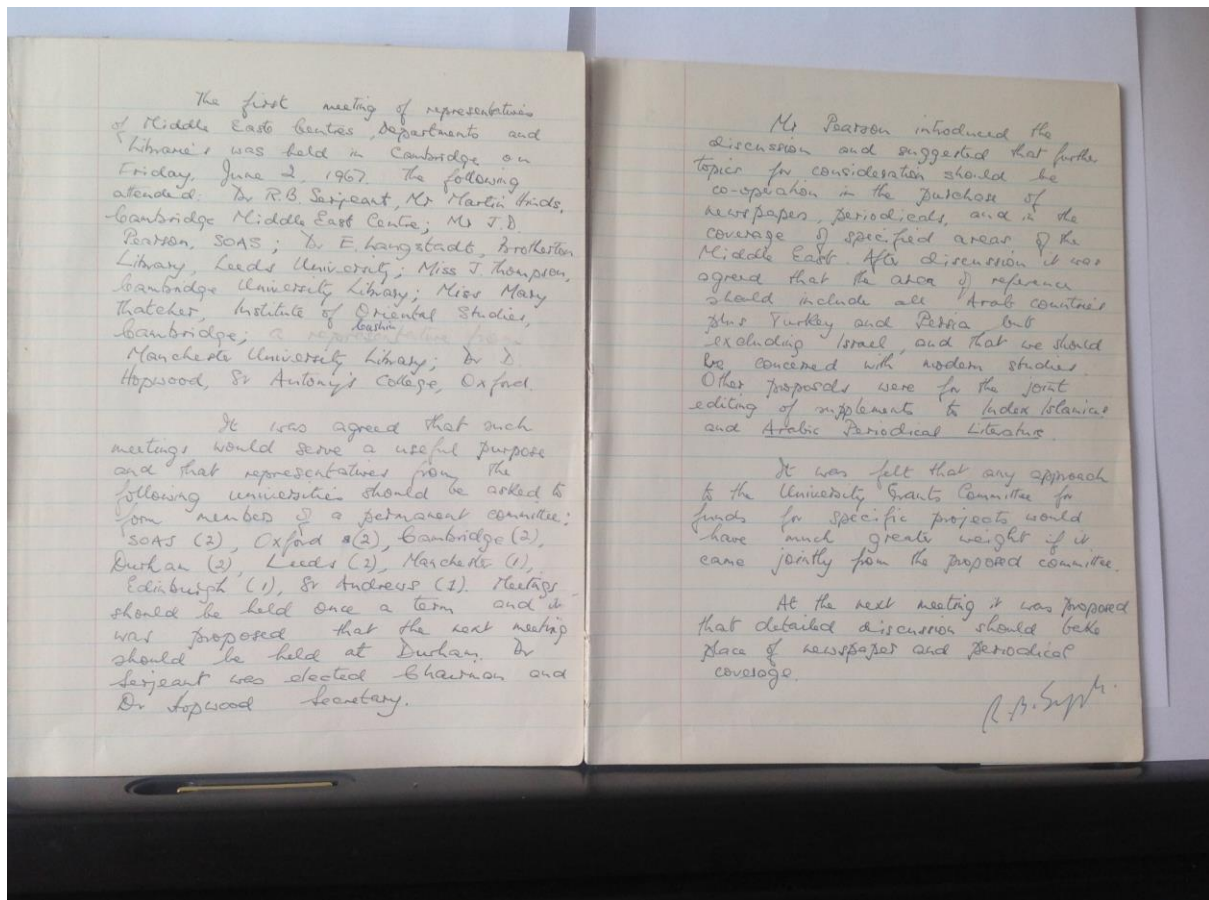
Pearson himself who had served in the Middle East in WWII in signals

Derek Latham- polymath, doctor, pilot and the 'best' Arabist in Britain of his time

Albert Hourani- our greatest scholar.

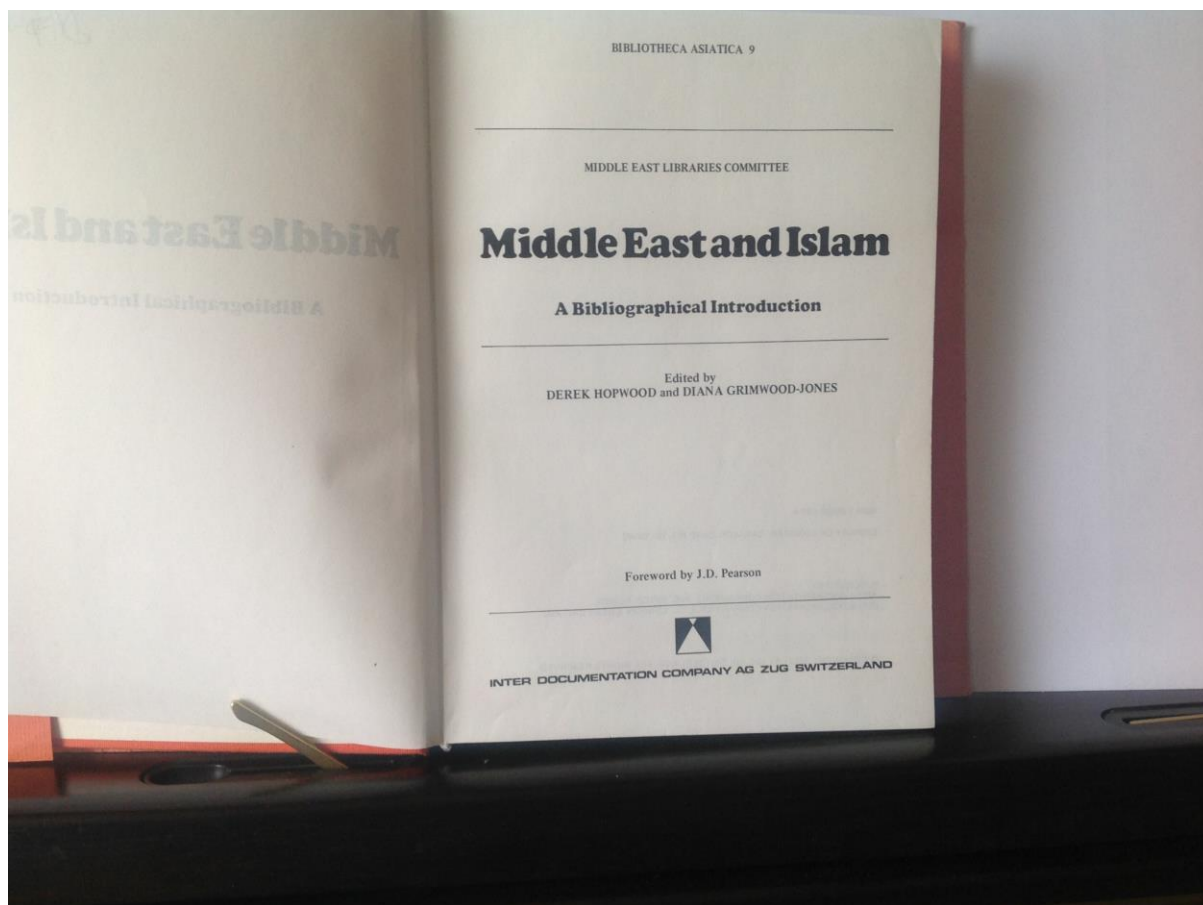
Some were eccentric in an old fashioned way, notably I.J.C.Foster, Keeper of Oriental Books in Durham. He did not contribute much to Melcom meetings but was a regular attender. He would address meetings with his eyes closed, usually saying something quite irrelevant. Sir James Craig (late British Ambassador in Saudi Arabia), his colleague in Durham wrote: "Foster was an original, eccentric bachelor who had no social life. His dress never varied, tweed jacket, baggy grey flannels and a cardigan stained with dribble from his pipe.

I came across him once in Aleppo of all places. His clothes unchanged in a Syrian summer from the routine of a Durham winter (including a shabby gaberdine raincoat) caused a sensation in the suq. The consulate told me Foster was in town and I found him staying, all innocently, in what he taken for a hotel but was in fact a brothel. The ladies told me they found him charming because he had addressed them in highly classical Arabic".



Melcom with these and other personalities has never looked back and I think it is our achievement to have kept going under dedicated chairpersons, secretaries and treasurers.

From the beginning we were keen to produce guides, bibliographies under Pearson's encouragement.



This is a good example of a 'useful' bibliography. The University of Monash in Australia at the time was establishing a Department of Islamic Studies and wanted to know the cost of building a library to support the Department. Pearson was asked to do this but came up with the idea of asking a group of experts to make their own recommendations. InterDocumentation of Leiden agreed to publish the results. So Melcom called its first conference in Cambridge in 1970 and 27 contributors suggested some 3,500 items for the library.

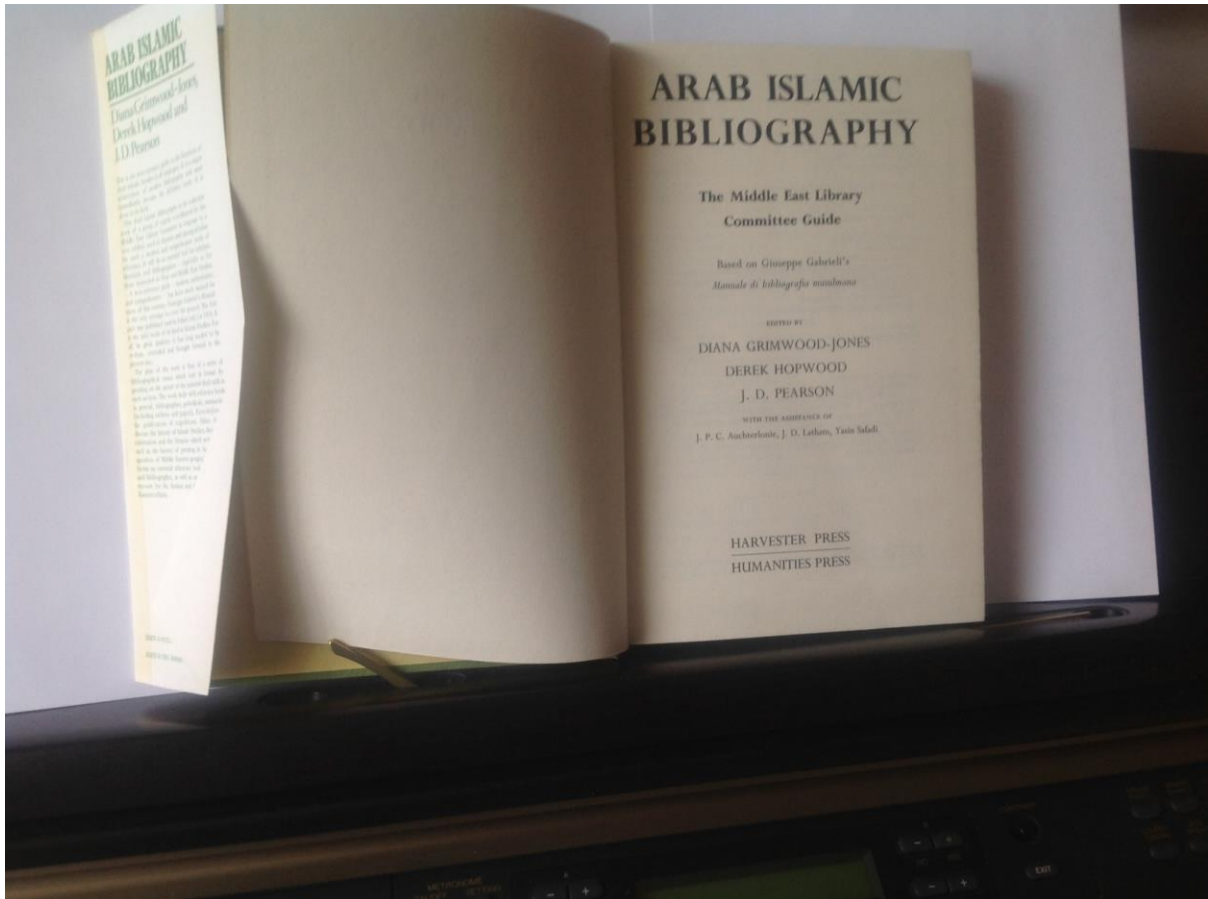
Pearson wrote in the introduction to the guide about the way in which it was produced.

"The technique used is a novel one for the compilation of a bibliography, and indeed the meeting resembled an editorial college rather than a symposium, and it might have been thought to be rather a dull one in consequence. But every person who attended it, whether scholar or librarian, agreed that it was astonishingly interesting, and I would certainly recommend it to all those

contemplating a similar objective". The completed guide was edited by Diana Grimwood-Jones and myself.

The Melcom website mentions the obvious drawbacks of such a method. I don't myself know what these might be.

InterDocumentation was satisfied and suggested a second edition – this we did, edited by Diana Grimwood-Jones and then a supplement edited by Paul Auchterlonie.



These led on to Pearson's pet project – an updating of Giuseppe Gabrieli's 'Manuale di bibliografia musulmana (1916)' – a guide to reference works. He persuaded 16 contributors to co-operate again, not in a conference but in a series of seminars and with specially commissioned papers. The volume 'Arab-Islamic bibliography; the Melcom guide' was published by Harvester Press in 1979. It was edited by six members of Melcom.

Again, Pearson wrote in the introduction: "Melcom now offers this new guide to reference materials for Islamic studies along the same lines as Gabrieli's work, supplementing it with information on what has been contributed by scholars, librarians, bibliographers and others since the publication of the 'Manuale di bibliografia musulmana' in 1916. It will certainly become an indispensable reference book."

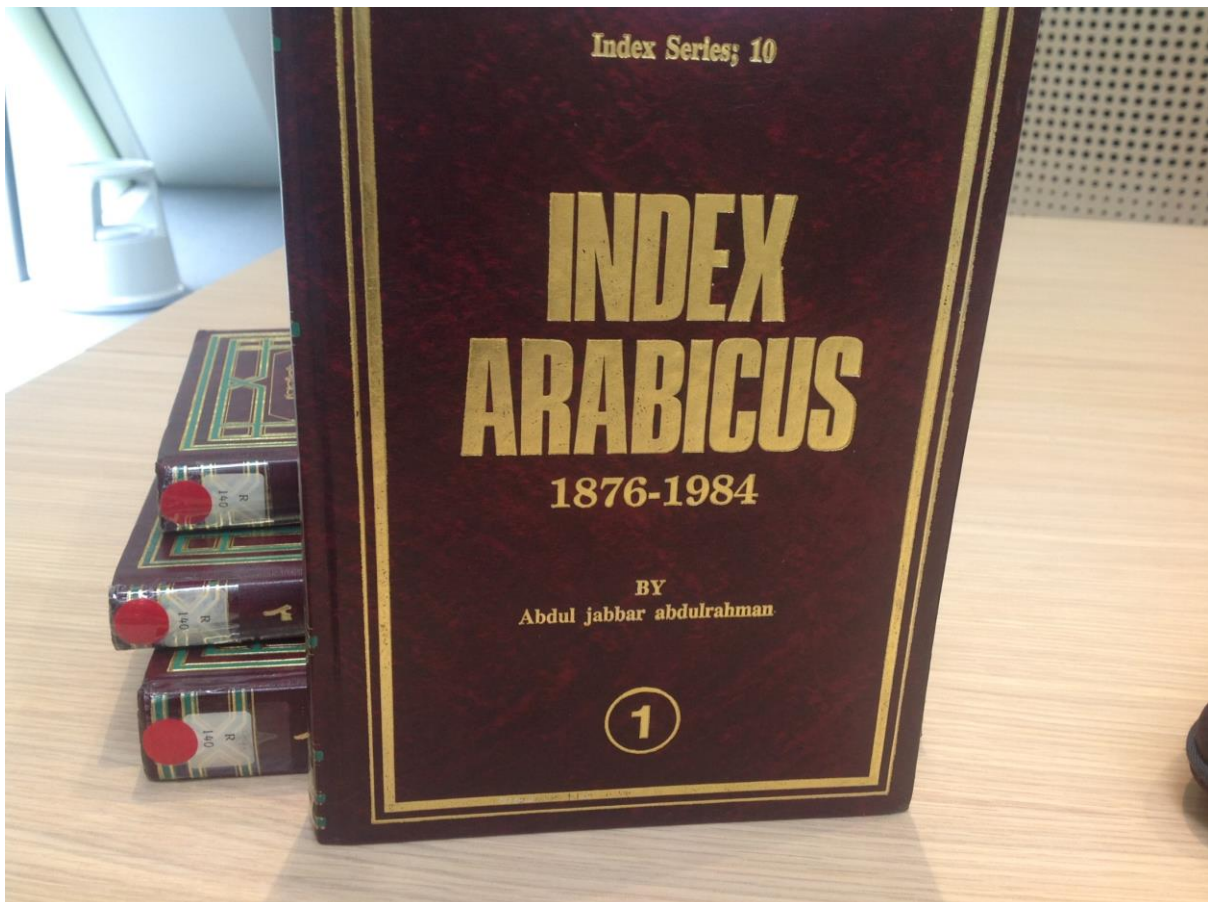
The Manuale plus the three guides I think exhausted Melcom's co-operative publishing energy but it was by no means the end of our guides. These were now taken on by individual specialists in different fields.

3 Photos (Melcom publications 1-4, 5-10, 11-16)

All volumes were useful and comprehensive and often pioneering, for example Gillian Grant's guide to Middle East photographic collections and Elwell-Sutton's exhaustive bibliographical guide to Iran.

What of the Index Arabicus mentioned in Melcom's first minutes? It was to be the Arabic version of the Index Islamicus supervised by myself and funded by Oxford and SOAS. We appointed a Lebanese librarian to complete the work, Nawal Mikdashi, who worked very hard for several years scanning numerous Arabic journals. Eventually she produced 20,000 entries arranged as in Index Islamicus.

The problem was printing. The only possible place was Beirut. We found that the Arab University was willing and able to take on the task. Robin Bidwell took the boxes of cards out to Beirut. I saw them in the basement of the Arab University on 12 April 1975. On the 13th the Lebanese civil war broke out.



14 years later Index Arabicus appeared published in Baghdad in 4 volumes edited by 'Abd al-Jabbar 'Abd al-Rahman. It had identical entries and arrangement to ours. I wondered.

The editor wrote: "I used as a basis for this bibliography a method inspired somewhat by Index Islamicus... The compiler saw every journal where possible – if not I relied on secondary sources. I thank everyone who helped me in the compilation and preparation of this work."

So there you had an Index Arabicus. Whether it was ours or not we shall probably never know. The evidence is circumstantial – same number of cards, same arrangement, many of the same periodicals.

In the meantime Melcom expanded into Melcom International and both are still going strong.



After thirty years I decided to pass the reins to others – into very good hands, as it still is. A new direction and new members are now evident but with the same principles of sharing information and of co-operation which can only be a good thing for our studies in these appallingly difficult times. Technology has changed everything and we live with its good and evil uses.