Preface

In the Spring of 1984, the Royal Library in Copenhagen, in cooperation with the Danish Foreign Ministry, sponsored an exhibition in Riyadh called "The Arabian Journey 1761–1767." The purpose of the exhibition was to commemorate a little–understood and long–forgotten episode in the relations between Europe and the Arab World, the Royal Danish Expedition to the Yemen. It was true, there were records of the expedition, including a multi–volume account left by its sole survivor, Carsten Niebuhr. These had appeared in a series of releases beginning in 1772. By 1778, Niebuhr's work of publication was largely complete, although a final posthumous volume would not be published until 1837. In the years that followed publication, translations from Niebuhr's original German would appear in French, Dutch, Italian, and even Farsi. Excerpts in English would be included in the travel compendia for which eighteenth-century Europe had developed a nearly insatiable appetite. More recently, there was a book—in Swedish, later translated into English—whose title, *Arabia Felix*, or "Happy Arabia," captured the quixotic, and ultimately unhappy, quest that the expedition represented. However, in 1984 what was *not* known about Carsten Niebuhr and the Danish expedition was out all of proportion to what was.

To the serious student of the European exploration of Arabia, Carsten Niebuhr had always been a name to conjure with. He was cited by many of the explorers and travelers who followed in his footsteps as their great predecessor, although specific references were surprisingly brief. John Lewis Burckhardt, the Swiss traveler who in the early part of the nineteenth century had been the first European in centuries to see Petra and then Abu Simbel, clearly had read Niebuhr, although textual citations were few. But Burckhardt died in Cairo in 1817 and his accounts—largely written without access to scholarly resources—were published posthumously, so the absence of references is understandable. Richard Burton appears to have read him carefully, although Burton was not a man to readily credit others laboring in the same field. Burton gave his grudging approbation to the "accurate"

Niebuhr, although references in his *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to El-Madinah and Meccah* focused more on Niebuhr's occasional lapses than on his celebrated accuracy. Others were more generous. William Gifford Palgrave, the half-Jewish English Jesuit who traveled to the heart of the peninsula under the sponsorship of the Emperor of France, dedicated his *Central and Eastern Arabia* to Niebuhr, "in honor of that intelligence and courage which first opened Arabia to Europe." H. St.J. B. Philby opens *The Heart of Arabia* with a quote from the French edition of the *Voyage en Arabie* and calls Niebuhr "the father of Arabian exploration." In *A Pilgrimage to Nejd* the Blunts quote Niebuhr extensively on a matter close to their hearts, that of horse-breeding. J. G. Lorimer in his monumental *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia* says that in 1908 Niebuhr was still the most valuable source of information about the Gulf of the middle of the eighteenth century. Of the English-speaking travelers and writers, however, only the American divine Edward Robinson appears to have been familiar with Niebuhr in the original German. Robinson spent several months in Germany prior to his journey to Egypt, the Sinai and Palestine in 1838–39 and refers extensively to Niebuhr in his text.

In his classic *The Penetration of Arabia* David Hogarth devoted a chapter to Niebuhr in the Yemen. Hogarth recognized that Niebuhr had left the most complete account to date of that remote corner of the Arabian peninsula. But there was more to Niebuhr than the Yemen, and Hogarth was ample, if not unstinting, in his praise:

> If he was not the most brilliant of the party, if any of his fellows surpassed him in energy, courage, and endurance, in intelligence or in his measure of that scientific temper which is equally free from prejudice and from laxity, then a more remarkable mission was never dispatched to any land.

If the compliment is a bit left-handed, we will become used to it. Niebuhr, by common consent, appears to have been "intelligent" if not "brilliant." But we should probably reserve judgment until we have seen the complete man.

Of as much interest as the citations are the omissions. Edward William Lane, writing his *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* seventy years later, ignores Niebuhr completely although Niebuhr devotes over 200 pages of his *Travels in Arabia* to Egypt, including descriptions of the inhabitants, their dress, religion, diversions, musical instruments and games. In the voluminous notes to his translation of the *Thousand Nights and a Night* Burton gives us his usual encyclopedic treatment of subjects and sources but makes no mention of Niebuhr's treatment of some of the same material. Charles Doughty does not mention Niebuhr at all. Where he is cited as an

historical source in nineteenth-century accounts of the Yemen there are few textual references and a curious lack of precision about the dates and details of Niebuhr's sojourn in that country.

It should come as no surprise that all the references cited above are in English. Surely among the reasons for the lack of knowledge must be that the complete Niebuhr has never been available in anything but the original German, and the editors and abridgers have not done him justice. In addition, most of the references we see are the works of travelers and not academicians, for whom the monuments of German oriental scholarship were probably inaccessible. Niebuhr was also a traveler, although he was a traveler of unusual perspicacity. He certainly had access to the literature of the subject when he prepared his accounts, and his bibliography would include over 120 sources, from Herodotus to the latest eighteenth-century publications. But, like Burckhardt, Burton, Palgrave, Lorimer, and Philby, Niebuhr was also a first-hand observer of what he reported. What makes his account especially valuable is the quality of his insights: he was a particularly shrewd observer and recorded only what he saw with his own eyes. Where he did not see, but only heard at second hand, he tells us, lest we give him more credit than, in his eyes, he deserved.

But there is more to the puzzle than the lack of familiarity of English writers with an obscure, eighteenth-century German traveler. Because in its conception, the Royal Danish Expedition aspired to an end that lay beyond individual languages or narrow national concerns. Its frankly ecumenical appeal at the outset makes the parochial nature of the response all the more puzzling. The "Arabian Journey 1761–1767," commemorated by representatives of Denmark and Saudi Arabia in Riyadh in 1984, was nothing less than a multifaceted, pan-European undertaking devoted to the highest moral purpose. The expedition may have been sponsored by the King of Denmark, but it was made up of Germans and Swedes in addition to Danes—and a German, Prof. Johann David Michaelis, had been its prime mover. Another German, Carsten Niebuhr, was the only survivor and the only one that anyone really remembered. Among its objectives had been an understanding of Arabia in general, but its specific purpose had been to assist in the explication of the Hebrew Bible, and scholars throughout the Continent had been consulted in the drafting of its terms of reference. The goal of the expedition may have been "Happy Arabia" but, by the time Niebuhr returned to Copenhagen in 1767, his peregrinations had taken him to the west coast of India, Persia as far inland as Persepolis, then to Iraq, the Levant, Cyprus, Anatolia, and Rumelia, as well as the Yemen. In fact, due to a series of circumstances that can only be described as fortuitous, the

longest and most concentrated period of time the members spent together, as an expedition, was not in Arabia at all. It was in Egypt.

It was also in Egypt, at about the same time as the exhibition in Riyadh, that I found the 1766–80 editions, in French, of Niebuhr's *Travels in Arabia*. For many years I had been interested in the European exploration of Arabia and had seen references to Niebuhr in other works, including those listed above. Now, I had access to his works at first or, at least, at second hand. The books were all and more than Burton, Palgrave, Lorimer, Philby, and Hogarth promised, and as my knowledge deepened, so did my appreciation of the value of Niebuhr's contributions. They were not just another dry account of one man's travels, but represented the record of a serious intellectual enterprise involving Enlightenment science, sacred philology, the Bible as history, "Orientalism," Egyptology, and discovery. At the same time, they had all the ingredients of a first-rate story. And no one, at least in the English–speaking world, seemed to know about them.

Until the second half of the twentieth century there were only the Niebuhr volumes themselves, but very little else to memorialize the expedition. Then, a series of books appeared in Swedish, German, and Danish. The first, in 1962, was Thorkild Hansen's *Arabia Felix,* a translation of which appeared in English in 1964. It chronicled the sometimes contentious relationships between the members of the expedition and gave a lively, not to say breezy, account of their progress towards the Yemen and their misadventures there. This was followed in 1968 by reprints in German of the three volumes of Niebuhr's *Reisebeschreibung*, or Travels. Then in 1986—in response to the Hansen book, which he believed did not do justice to the expedition's achievements—Stig Rasmussen of the Royal Library in Copenhagen published a small paperback review and catalogue of the expedition titled *Carsten Niebuhr und die Arabische Reise 1761–1767*. He followed this in 1990 with an impressive memorial entitled *Den Arabiske Rejse 1761–1767*. It was not a small paperback, but a large tome consisting of instructions to the members of the expedition, excerpts of the printed works, maps, reprints of original plates (some in color) and scholarly essays on the contributions of the members. However, it was published only in Danish.

Missing for the English reader was any serious discussion of Johann David Michaelis, the foremost Oriental philologist of the eighteenth century and the real author of the expedition, and of his belief that in the highlands of the Yemen the travelers would find a variant of Arabic, an "eastern" dialect of the language that was closest to Hebrew, and so a link with the original language of the Scriptures. Missing also was the link to Enlightenment science, and the boundless self-confidence of those who believed that anything—including the Bible—could be understood if subjected to rigorous scientific examination.

Finally, there was little discussion of the elaborate pains to which Michaelis had gone to prepare the members of the expedition for their work of biblical scholarship, and of the hundreds of specific queries he drafted to guide their investigations. The fact that Michaelis ultimately failed to put his stamp on the results of the expedition in no way detracts from the fact that it represented a kind of milestone in European intellectual history. As we will see, what Niebuhr and his companions produced was, at the same time, much less and much more than Michaelis had hoped.

The sojourn in Egypt was an unexpected boon, the country not even appearing on the original itinerary of the expedition. But what an opportunity it presented to an undertaking with an avowedly biblical purpose! When Niebuhr and his companions were detained for a year in Egypt in 1761–62 it was, after all, in a place which some have called the cradle of the Jewish people. But, although Egypt had existed for millennia, with or without the Jews, the notion that its history served as little more than stage setting for the great drama of mankind as played out in the Hebrew scriptures was pervasive in eighteenth-century Europe. The notion persists to this day in the Christian West, and the Bible as history remains nearly as vexed subject at the outset of the twenty-first century as it was in the eighteenth—or indeed, any other—century. To his credit, Niebuhr approached the subject of Egypt with an open mind, without the preconceptions or credulity that had characterized much of the traditional European approach to the country.

What Niebuhr also gave the West was a first critical look at the Egypt of the middle of the eighteenth century, as well as the first detailed maps of the city of Cairo and the Delta. In 1761–62, Ali Bey Bulut Kapan—the "cloud catcher"—was maneuvering to establish his unchecked rule, becoming in the process a worthy precursor to Mohammed Ali. As seen through Niebuhr's eyes, Ali Bey was only one of the caste of military slaves, or Mamluks, that had ruled Egypt since the arrival of the first Central Asians in the thirteenth century. But Ali Bey would soon replace the unbridled rapacity of the Mamluks with his own more modern and systematic plunder of the wealthy province that Egypt had been at least since the Ptolemies. At about this same time, the study of the hieroglyphs and the ancient history of the country—or Egyptology—was beginning to free itself from the shackles of several odd but persistent notions that stood in the way of an understanding of ancient Egypt. One of these was a belief in the arcane nature of the Egyptian hieroglyphs, understandable only to initiates, that seemed to render fruitless any rigorous textual analysis.

It was in 1761, the year Carsten Niebuhr and his companions arrived in Egypt, that the Abbé J. J. Barthélémy took the first tentative steps towards an understanding of the hieroglyphs by suggesting that they contained

elements of a phonetic system. Niebuhr made his own modest contribution to the process of decipherment, a process that would be continued by another learned European excursion into Egypt some forty years later, the French Expedition. But there were other influences as well, a result of the focus on the Bible and of the tendency to subject evidence, first, to the test of biblical conformity before it passed muster as history. That the pyramids of Giza were the original corn storehouses of Joseph, and that they had been built by the Hebrews (the Egyptians not having the requisite technical skills), were among the least absurd of these notions.

In the Sinai, the Danish expedition would look for the odd inscriptions at "Gebel el Mokatab," first reported by the Bishop of Clougher forty years before. They sparked intense interest in Europe since they were thought to be the precursors of the square Hebrew script, learned by the Israelites during their wanderings in the wilderness. They were not, but in the process Niebuhr and his colleagues discovered something almost as interesting, the pharaonic temple at Serabit al-Khadem, where later researchers would find traces of the so-called proto-Sinaitic script, which *was* a precursor to Hebrew. All these things were afterthoughts in the original plan of the expedition. But there was hardly a thing in the world of the Orient that didn't interest Niebuhr and, freed for the year from the painstaking directions of Michaelis, he made very good use of his time in Egypt.

The book that follows—*Niebuhr in Egypt: European Science in a Biblical World*—is only a part of the story of the expedition and of Niebuhr's part in it. Hogarth may have focused on "Niebuhr in the Yemen," but he might just as well have added chapters on "Niebuhr in the Hejaz," "Niebuhr in Oman," "Niebuhr in the Arabian Gulf," or, had he permitted himself to expand his brief, "Niebuhr in India," or "Niebuhr in Persia." Or, for that matter, "Niebuhr in Egypt." Because it was largely in the years 1761–62—particularly in Egypt, but also in the Yemen—that the biblical nature of the expedition played itself out. As we will see below, when the survivors set sail from Mocha for Bombay in August of 1763, the expedition to "Happy Arabia" was technically over. However, much remained to be seen in the Orient, and the next four years would yield as much published material as the previous three. But, however much Niebuhr accomplished in the years 1763–67, the later period lacked the drama of those first years of promise, enthusiasm, and disappointment, followed by the premature death of the other members of the expedition. Not surprisingly, Michaelis himself seemed to lose all interest in the progress of the expedition after it left the Yemen. These other Niebuhrs deserve their own chapters, but they will be saved for another work.

The reader might ask "Why a book instead of a translation? Why not let Niebuhr speak for himself?" The answer, a least from several publishers, was that those really interested in Niebuhr would consult the original in German, and a translation was not necessary. And there were already excerpts available in English, products of the eighteenth-century enthusiasm for travel and discovery. But these were perhaps too conscious of the attention span of the audience, and the comment in one was typical:

> It would be unfair to neglect advertising the reader that the whole of Mr. Niebuhr's account of his travels and observations in Arabia is not comprised in these volumes . . . Various things seemed to be addressed so exclusively to men of erudition that they could not be expected to win the attention of the public in general and have therefore been left out.

Unfortunately, in addition to all the Arabic texts and the mapmaking—arguably, matters too recondite for the general reader—the above excerpt makes no mention of the Bible, Egyptology, or indeed of Egypt at all. But it is these things that give life to what might otherwise may seem a dry recitation of facts, of latitudes and compass headings, etymologies, and obscure place names.

But a better answer is that, without the perspective of Michaelis and his part in establishing the intellectual framework of the expedition, the story is incomplete. Only with an understanding of this framework can the value of Niebuhr's insights can be appreciated. Part of this is the fault of Niebuhr himself. He was a man who would as soon embellish a fact as tell an untruth, and his reticence did not always serve him well. There were things that simply did not belong in print, including all mention of conflict with other members of the expedition. But they lent a human touch to the story, one not only of jealousy, frailty, and disappointment, but also of ambition and ultimate triumph.

The book that follows is an account of the expedition's year in Egypt, with lengthy excursions into the several subplots—Enlightenment science, the Bible as history, and Egyptology—mentioned above. It makes no claim to being scholarly, and is aimed at the general reader, although it resorts to no gimmicks in its appeal. The above subjects *are* difficult and no attempt will be made to make them appear easy. But if the Bible as history, and its baleful effect on serious scholarship about Egypt, is considered recondite, it is also topical and should be of interest to the general reader concerned with the region today. The book makes no claim of access to original sources, other than the Niebuhr works themselves. A word about method is in order. The original Niebuhr is in German, although my introduction to him was through

the French translation, from which I made my own English translation. All citations, however, have been carefully reconciled with the original German. This involved the process of working with three texts and, in effect, looking over the shoulder of the anonymous French translator of 1776. While he was an invaluable guide to some of the German archaisms, he didn't always get it right. As a matter of interest, the French reads like a modern language, while the syntax of Niebuhr's eighteenth century Low German presents difficulties closer to translating Arabic than a Romance language.

Along with Niebuhr, the book makes no concession to the notion of the Orient as a place of mystery and sensuality, of strange practices and arcane knowledge, as if Orientals were somehow fundamentally different from human beings in other parts of the planet. And we will not see Niebuhr as a representative of a Europe intent on domination of the East. That presumption would violate every principle that he stood for. If he dealt with a part of the Orient with which the West had—and still has—an historical difficulty, he set a standard of openness and fairness that shines through the text. In that text we will see Orientals and Europeans—Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike—displayed through their own words and actions in various flattering, and not–so–flattering, guises. It would be a mistake to try to conform Niebuhr's observations to a twenty-first century standard of correctness, and his occasional lapses—departures from the high standard he set for himself—will be permitted. They will make him only more human, and his story more believable.

In dealing with a subject as contentious as the relationships between the three "people of the book"—in the twenty-first no less than the eighteenth century—it would be difficult to avoid trespassing on the sensibilities of one party or another to the conflict. The prejudices and suspicions are plain for all to see: the pervasive animus directed against Islam and its founder in the Christian West; anti-Jewish sentiments among both eighteenth-century Christians and Muslims; anti-Papist sentiments by northern European Protestants; lingering suspicion and mistrust by Orthodox Christians of their Latin coreligionists; a perceived Ottoman and Jewish conspiracy to subject native Egyptians; strictures enacted against Copts and Jews by the Mamluk authorities in Egypt; the fear of a fifth column of covert Muslims and Jews in Europe; anti-Frankish sentiments directed by eighteenth-century Semites at this particular European traveler. When they are reported by Niebuhr, they are done so openly and directly, and an attempt will be made to deal with them equally openly and directly in the book that follows. Niebuhr doesn't preach, and we will resist the temptation to sermonize. But with some of the most difficult issues—the Bible as history, the place of the Children of Israel in Egypt, the history of Egypt itself—we will see how many of our attitudes today

are unchanged from those of the eighteenth century. Where earlier scholars were wrong-headed or mistaken, we will see their errors, not in the sense of being triumphalist or wise after-the-fact, but rather to learn from their mistakes. But there should be no mistaking that some of the errors persist.

In his chapter on Niebuhr in the Yemen, David Hogarth remarked that it would be to tedious to quote "a hundredth part of Niebuhr's judicious observations." I hope, with this book, to bring to the reader interested in Egypt a portion of that trove.

The manuscript has been fortunate in its readers: an anonymous reviewer and sometime editor of the *American Journal of Romance Philology*; Suzanne L. Marchand, a profesor of European Intellectual History at Louisiana State University; and Mr. Michel-Pierre Detalle a long-time student of and expert in Niebuhr. Each of them reviewed the manuscript carefully and made many suggestions of great value. I would like to think that their reviews made up in quality for their relative lack of quantity. Any errors or misapprehensions that remain in the text that follows are, of course, my own.

A word on the transliteration of Arabic is in order. The rigorous and consistent use of a system of transliteration is alone an infallible guide to the determination of the original triliteral root of the word, and I am a great believer in such systems. However, I believe that the systematic use of diacritics here would serve only as a headache for the typesetter without adding much to an understanding of the text. I have consequently adopted forms closer to popular rather than scholarly usage. Hence Omar, Taizz and Koran, not 'Omar, Ta'izz, and Qur'an. I have also sometimes been inconsistent in my use of "sun" and "moon" letters: thus, Salah ad-Din, not Salah-al-Din, but Burg al-Zafar rather than Burg az-Zafar. They simply sounded better. In any case, the Arabic of Niebuhr's map of Cairo (with occasional irregularities) and of Michaelis's questions is listed in the Appendices and is available to those interested in the original language.

I would like to thank in particular the art department of the Royal Library in Copenhagen for the copies of the original plates that appear throughout the text.