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COLLÈGE AHUNTSIC

Donald Presgrave Little, 1932–2017

How do you announce to the scholarly community he belonged to the passing of one of its most prominent members? How can one avoid the tired clichés of sorrow and bereavement while giving a just measure of the man? Donald P. Little left his family and this world on the 29th of June 2017 in Montréal with Betsy (née Elizabeth Wistar), his wife of fifty-two years, by his side.

We all knew Donald Little in one capacity or another as a true friend of knowledge. His pursuit of higher education led him from his hometown of Elizabethton, Tennessee, to Harvard University, then to Stanford and ultimately to UCLA, where he did his Ph.D. He spent his entire career at the Institute of Islamic Studies of McGill University in Montreal, which he directed for a number of years and where he taught Islamic History and Arabic Language. There he supervised the theses and dissertations of men and women too numerous to count, in fields in which he was a specialist, namely Islamic history and medieval Arabic historiography, but in other related domains as well. The long list of publications that was published in vol. IX, no. 1 (2005) of this journal,^{*} and the fact that he was made Professor Emeritus in 2000 upon his retirement, are both testimony to his scholarship and to the life he spent assiduously researching and writing.

To many of the readers of and contributors to *MSR*, and to those who gravitate around the field of Mamluk studies, he was a friend and colleague. For some, he was a teacher and it is thus that I will always remember him. More than anything else, Professor Little evokes for me memories of my younger self and of the heroic times, now long gone, of my Ph.D. studies. Then, I visited him regularly in his office, where I would find him sitting at his desk, surrounded by his books and by the ubiquitous pictures and drawings of hippos, an animal he was fond of. We talked, of course, about the Mamluks to whose history he devoted the essence of his scholarly attention. To study the rich historiography that was produced under them, he devised a technique, simple but efficient, consisting of a word-to-word comparison of texts, which I and others would end up using in our own research. Our conversations often ended up deviating from the martial slaves of Egypt and Syria to more personal matters. He told me how, while in the US army, he got into learning, and eventually teaching, Arabic. He told me about meeting Betsy, who

^{*}See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/browse-download.html> to view or download the entire issue or Professor Little's bibliography.



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would eventually become his wife, in Cairo while he was doing research for his Ph.D. He recalled his visits to extra-continental countries from which many of his students hailed: Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, etc. He fondly spoke of the long and tortuous path that led him in 1978 to study and catalogue the Haram al-Sharif documents in Jerusalem, a feat in and of itself.

I remember years ago Professor Little telling me how much he liked the eulogy I gave at the funeral of a friend of mine and student of his and remarking, half jokingly, that he would want something similar to be said about him at his passing. My heart filled with sorrow, I had wondered aloud where my friend had gone and then surmised, in nostalgic reminiscence, that his spirit was visiting the places he had gone to during his short but well-filled life. So where is the spirit of Donald Little, I wonder? Is it in his and Betsy's summer residence in New London, New Hampshire? Or is it in the beautiful Mount-Royal park, the jewel in the heart of Montreal, the city where he spent most of his adult life? Is it keeping a watchful eye over Betsy and his son David and his family? Is it wandering the stacks of the magnificent Islamic Studies library? Or is it hovering over the Haram al-Sharif and the gardens of Lahore?

Farewell, Donald P. Little.

