



AN EMBARRASSMENT OF RICHES
KHALED EL-ROUAYHEB

Khaled El-Rouayheb is Gardner Cowles Associate Professor of Islamic Intellectual History at the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University. He has been a Junior Research Fellow of the British Academy (2003–06) and a Junior Mellon Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton (2008–09). His publications include the two monographs: *Before Homosexuality in the Arabic-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (University of Chicago Press, 2005) and *Relational Syllogisms and the History of Arabic Logic, 900–1900* (Brill, 2010); and a number of articles, encyclopedia-entries and book-reviews. He is also co-editor (with Sabine Schmidtke) of the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy*. – Address: Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University, 6 Divinity Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA.
E-mail: kel@fas.harvard.edu

My family and I arrived in a sunny, spacious, and tastefully furnished apartment in Villa Walther in early September 2011. I found the volumes of earlier Yearbooks neatly stacked on the bookshelves and of course started flicking through the pages in the following days and weeks, looking for names that I recognize (of which there are plenty) and perusing their reports. (The memory is surprisingly vivid, now that I write of it.) The friendliness and helpfulness of the staff is a recurrent motif in these reports and I very quickly came to see why. To the new Fellows reading this, I can say that the treatment you will receive really is five-star: you will be assisted with impressive competence and heartwarming kindness from the very first by each member of the staff: the receptionists, the librarians, the IT personnel, the kitchen staff, etc. The excellent three-course meals will spoil you,

especially if you arrive here – as I did – from a less-developed culinary culture in which lunch is most often a mass-produced sandwich that one gulps down quietly and rapidly in the office. My worries about gaining access to out-of-the-way books in oriental languages were put to shame by the librarians, who seemed to be able to conjure up anything I could possibly wish for, usually within a day or two. I also deeply appreciated the way Fellows' partners and children were made to feel welcome and integrated into the life of Wiko. My wife Manja had an immensely enjoyable and productive year, and our children loved the monthly family dinners and the Christmas party.

One thing that struck me upon arrival was the rather small number of Fellows. Meeting them on a daily basis, one quickly gets close to most of them. I learned a great deal from conversing with such a brilliant group of scholars and scientists and from listening to a series of outstanding presentations at the weekly colloquia covering a wide range of topics, including topics of which I was woefully unfamiliar. The natural scientists truly impressed me with their skill in making their research comprehensible to outsiders. There were, to be sure, some passionate discussions across the “two cultures”, especially in the early months. Some natural scientists were exposed for the first time – poor souls – to philosophical hermeneutics, Kuhnian paradigms, the social construction of reality, and the *de rigueur* scare quotes around words like “facts”, “objectivity”, and “data”. Conversely, humanists (like myself) received a healthy exposure to the sophisticated techniques and impressive results of natural scientists, usually presented with a conciseness and unpretentiousness that unfortunately are not as widespread in the humanities as they should be. My biologist colleagues and interlocutors may have been unfamiliar with (or unimpressed by) Michel Foucault or Thomas Kuhn, but they are some of the most intelligent and likeable people I have met. Over the course of the year, I also had many occasions to sit with historians, musicians and musicologists, authors and literary scholars, classicists, philosophers, lawyers, and even statisticians and those who commit a social science. I am exceedingly glad that I did.

As the year progressed, the discussions admittedly tended to wane. The main positions and dialectic moves became familiar, and the pressure of time began to make itself felt. Lunches tended to be consumed faster, and attendance at the many seminars, Wednesday or Thursday colloquia, reading groups, etc. began to fall visibly. Though I followed and enjoyed the five-week intensive German course at the beginning of the year, I chose not to continue with the language classes thereafter. This was perhaps the most painful decision I had to make while at Wiko. I had initially looked forward to this

chance – probably my last – to move my German from reading proficiency to active fluency. But alas it was not to be. One quickly realizes that the Tuesday colloquium takes up half of the Tuesday working hours: the colloquium itself from 11 to 1, followed by a seated three-course meal lasting until 2 or 2:30, after which most of us were simply too mentally exhausted (and full) to do more than, for example, catch up on e-mail or return library books. The Intermediate/Advanced German course would have taken up a similar portion of my Wednesdays (11 to 1, followed by lunch) and I simply could not afford to thus “lose” another day. This was especially so, given the additional Wednesday and Thursday colloquia (attendance at these is voluntary but one often does not wish to miss the presentations of one’s colleagues), interdisciplinary discussion meetings and workshops, and – in my case – the many relevant talks at the EUME seminar across the road at Villa Jaffé. From my own selfish perspective, I would have wished that fewer events were crammed into the working hours and would have preferred all colloquia (including the one on Tuesday) to have been scheduled after 4. But I also understand that it is impossible to get agreement on such matters from 40 Fellows – in fact I spoke to a number of Fellows who did not at all like the idea of having all colloquia after 4. Any proposed schedule is bound to be inconvenient to somebody; unfortunately I was that somebody this year, largely because Manja and I have small children and usually cannot supplement normal working hours by working very early in the mornings or very late in the afternoons or on weekends.

I came to Wiko with the somewhat unrealistic hopes of writing a book. I leave having written six chapters out of a planned nine. All in all, I have to be reasonably satisfied with this. I have sometimes in the past been able to write an article or chapter in a month if I had no other duties and could devote myself fully to the task. But a monograph is of course more than a number of separate chapters. It requires constant reflection on how the various parts fit together and contribute to an overall argument. Such second-order questions are clearer to me now, thanks in part to the challenge of presenting my work to the other Fellows at the Tuesday colloquium. I have also managed during my year at Wiko to finish the table of contents and the contracts for the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy* that I am co-editing with Professor Sabine Schmidtke of the Freie Universität.

Had I had world enough and time over the course of the year, I would now have been able to add a number of further accomplishments. I would have reported substantial progress with my German; seen the classic German movies arranged by Eva for her

German classes; conversed more often with the immensely learned German-speaking Fellows (Wolfgang, Dirk, Olivier); read Rilke with Mauricio and Philip; and participated more actively in the “Sources” workshop started by Alessandro and Samantha. I would have taken the numerous guided tours of Berlin arranged by Wiko; had my fill of the many excellent exhibitions, concerts, and operas that Berlin offers; gone to more talks at the Freie Universität, Humboldt-Universität, and numerous Max Planck Institutes; and attended some of the countless literary readings in the city (including readings of works by Wiko Fellows Dirk, Georgi, and Hoda).

But of course there is never enough time. Especially the second half of the year passed very quickly, and before I knew it I was listening to Philip and Thomas at the farewell party giving a moving performance of “O Wiko dear, the workday world is calling from distant lands, to summon us away ...” (to the tune of “Danny Boy”). As I write this, both my office and our apartment are full of moving boxes. I am painfully aware of all the things that I did not have time to do this year. I leave with six chapters – approximately 70,000 words – on my memory stick. They’d better be good.