In the field of architectural history Professor Creswell has made a bigger single-handed contribution to knowledge than any man living, and his output rivals that of such past workers as Viollet-le-Duc and Fergusson, whose standards were far less meticulous.

John H. Harvey, 1959.

It is standard practice for a book review to state the number of pages and plates, and the size of a volume. How many, though, give the weight as well? Schroeder, in evident admiration, tells us that volume 2 of Creswell’s *Early Muslim Architecture* weighs 20 pounds; Wilber that volume 1 of *Muslim Architecture of Egypt* weighs 18 pounds! As Runciman remarked, “No one can lightly move it from his shelves, and anyone who wishes to refer frequently from one volume to another must be in a good state of physical training.”

It has been fifty-five years since the publication of the first volume of *Early Muslim Architecture*, and in that time the tiny world of Islamic art history has grown so accustomed to drawing on its information and conclusions, so familiar with the excellence of its illustrations, plans, and tables, that we run the danger of being blasé about its achievement. To realize the impact of Creswell’s book in the 1930’s, there is no better way than to quote Myron B. Smith, who wrote in 1941: “Without implying that all that has been written before this work belongs to a djahiliya, this reader is convinced that *Early Muslim Architecture* will be known to future students as the *Zeitenwende* from which the past and future studies will be dated.” Creswell’s work attracted admiration among reviewers on numerous counts, notably its comprehensiveness, its presentation, and the certitude of its conclusions.

To start, as it were, at the end, Creswell’s conclusions are almost startlingly decisive. How many of us would now give serious considerations to the idea, for example, that Mshatta was pre-Islamic, or that the Dome of the Rock was originally a Byzantine structure? Yet our sense of conviction is due almost entirely to the arguments of Creswell. In Pope’s words, “There are a number of controversial issues familiar to the professionals in the field which are finished off by the author with a decisive finality, burying them deep under economical verbal epitaphs well calculated to keep them permanently quiescent.” The Gordian-knot effect which many of Creswell’s conclusions had when they were first published can be judged from Watzinger’s review. Watzinger accepted, I must say in the most gracious fashion, that the conclusion he and Wulzinger had reached only a few years before the publication of *Early Muslim Architecture* that the Great Mosque of Damascus had a Byzantine, Heraclean core had been disproved by Creswell. Such public recantation deserves credit, but the scholarly credit was Creswell’s.

As to the comprehensiveness of Creswell’s survey, it is evident not only in the sheer number of monuments he discusses but in the whole apparatus of investigation, down to the footnotes. Pope pointed out:

> Few books have been so fortified by footnotes. Sometimes minor points have been pressed with a luxurious, not to say, desperate, completeness. . . . At some points, however, the lavishness of detail may seem overdone. One reaches occasionally a point of diminishing returns, the time and effort involved for both author and reader being disproportionate to the results. Yet this very inclusiveness does give a feeling of confidence that nothing essential has been omitted and imparts to the work something of a character of an encyclopaedia or dictionary.

Schapiro evidently regarded it as “luxurious” — his phrase is “a little exaggerated” — and he cites as an example how Creswell in a footnote gives “sixteen references to the history of the invention and use of gunpowder *à propos* of the possibility that the Kaaba might have been destroyed by this familiar substance.” Details often obstructed the clarity of the text: Creswell “ignore, en tout cas, l’art des sacrifices nécessaires.”

A glance at the bibliography appended to each monument makes clear Creswell’s encyclopedic ambitions. Once again I quote from Smith:

> Some idea of the relative completeness of these bibliographies, including material in at least eight languages — Russian being the only notable omission — can be conveyed by noting that the Great Mosque of Cordoba has 196 entries, Ukhaidir has 45; the Mosque of 'Amr at...
Fustat, 190; the Great Mosque at Kairouan, 105; the Nilometer, 125; and the Mosque of Ahmed ibn Tulun, 204.9

Pope was also justly admiring of Creswell’s meticulous presentation of data:

Every device that the author could contrive to add lucidity to the presentation and to make it available for use and study has been employed. The scale of the drawings is in a simple decimal multiple, permitting them to be taken off instantly with a centimetre measure, and even the photographs, when presenting a flat view, have been reproduced to a measured scale so that they can often be used almost as a measured drawing, a precision for which students will be constantly grateful.10

Almost all the plans were specially drawn; Creswell took such pains that Gabriel was understandably incredulous that some measurements in the Dome of the Rock were to an exactitude of one millimeter.11

Creswell’s consideration for the reader is evident even in such a detail as the running heads. He wrote in his preface: “I hold that the space at the top of every page should be employed not, as is so frequently the case, to tell the reader the name of the book he is reading, which he presumably knows [my italics], but to tell him what the page in question is about.” Thus, the left-hand running head gives the chapter or the name of the monument, the right “the particular part of that discussion.”

When it came to discussion, Creswell’s prose style was terse and occasionally pointed. Schroeder, a master of purple prose, saw its virtues:

These laborious observations, syntheses, and analytic researches are set down in good plain English. To the beauty of the monuments the illustrations bear sufficient witness; and there are no effusions of pictorial language. A certain quiet humour, slightly acid in taste, occasionally recalls that other master of minute observation — Sherlock Holmes: after citing a notion of De Vogüé’s concerning the origin of the stalactite pendentive, for example, Creswell’s pawky ‘there are two objections against this theory, one serious, the other fatal’ immediately transforms De Vogüé into Dr. Watson. It is quite just: De Vogüé’s ingenuity was too ingenuous.12

The single-mindedness that distinguishes all aspects of his presentation was one reflection of Creswell’s singular purpose. He pursued the collection of data with physical stamina and mental resolve, achieving on his own what teams have rarely achieved. Harvey regarded Muslim Architecture of Egypt, vol. 2, as an authoritative inventory comparable only with the work of such official bodies as our own Royal Commissions on Historical Monuments, provided with a large staff, public funds, and special facilities for access. The last is a factor of immense importance, as will be realized by anyone who has to deal with the custodians of religious monuments and private buildings in this or any country, but more especially outside north-western Europe, in countries where the possibilities of procrastination and courteous evasion are unlimited.13

Smith described his activities in terms befitting Indiana Jones: “Creswell’s enterprise in penetrating the French archaeological preserve of Tunisia to record for the first time the Great Mosque of Susa deserves high commendation. The spirit of Britain’s explorers lives on in such endeavor.”14

Praise of Creswell attains unsurpassed hyperbole with Schroeder: Creswell has no peers; and all who enjoy his acquaintance know that his supremacy is the fruit of an entire devotion, notable energy, and a generous passion for truth and justice which ranges his subject as a Forest Perilous, smiting down Rivoira, Strzygowski, and all other strong monomaniacs who cross his path, and chastising the mean in the ignominy of footnotes.

But it is not my purpose here merely to record admiration and debt. The reviews of Creswell’s major works certainly contained criticisms, though it is worth pointing out that few were critical of Creswell’s methodology. Perhaps, as Schroeder observed, “To write shortly upon the achievement of a friend is so comfortable a task as to relax almost all sense of critical duty.”15

Wilber, for one, stated that he was “in perfect agreement” with Creswell’s “concept and method.”16 In fact, criticisms were often trivial, perhaps none more so than Littmann’s lament that Early Muslim Architecture, all 414 pages of volume 1, contained a few typographical errors. It is difficult to be sure whether Littmann was more upset because he had himself proofread the galleys or because, despite his proofreading, his own name was spelt with only one t and one n.17

Only three reviews temper their praise with reservations about Creswell’s approach — Schroeder’s of 1941, Meyer Schapiro’s, and Hamilton’s of 1958 — while only one is dismissive: Sauvaget, for reasons we shall see shortly.

Creswell was, first and foremost, concerned to resolve a monument’s absolute and relative chronology, and