

AUB Founders Day 2009
Torch-bearers: Scholars from AUB
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“We, the undersigned, William A. Booth, William E. Dodge, David Hoadley, and B. Chittenden, being citizens of the state of New York—and Abner Kingman and Joseph S. Ropes, being citizens of the state of Massachusetts...”

This is how the text of the charter for the establishment of the Syrian Protestant College, now the American University of Beirut, was introduced on April 14, 1863. It added that the signers were “desirous of associating ourselves [themselves] for benevolent, charitable, literary, scientific, and missionary purposes.”

Daniel Bliss was appointed president of the Syrian Protestant College on January 23, 1862.

We are gathered today to honor these founders of AUB. Their immense foresight is best described by Daniel Bliss, in one of his daily letters to his wife Abby Maria and their children, who spent the academic year 1873-74 in Amherst, Massachusetts. President Daniel Bliss summed up this amazing foresight by requesting his wife to “tell Professor Tyler that we are making history out here very fast.” Indeed, we are here today as part of this remarkable history. Daniel Bliss, this great history maker, was very meticulous in his work, the example of which appears in the book, *Letters from a New Campus*, collected and annotated by Douglas and Belle Dorman Rugh and Alfred H. Howell, and published by the AUB press in 1994; Daniel Bliss supervised all the details of building a university from the

mundane needs of the daily life on campus, to administration, teaching, fund raising, and to negotiating with the Ottoman Empire.

When President Dorman asked me to speak on this important occasion, I was thrilled and challenged. Yet, my experience at AUB—which may be very long—both as a student and a faculty member—has confirmed to me that the unique nature of AUB is best demonstrated in its being a collective concern where the people of the United States of America and the people of the Middle East—especially this great tolerant host country, Lebanon—have been working effectively together for over 143 years to propagate this jewel of higher education, based in Beirut, with its fame spread over the entire globe. This concept led me to speak today about those I call "The Torch-bearers: Scholars" from AUB, if not the cofounders of AUB.

As you might guess, defining scholarship is not an easy matter, especially when one has been surrounded by scholars for more than 45 years of academic life. This is a serious challenge, because I am sure that I will miss talking about many who qualify and for whom I must apologize, for a full credit of all AUB scholars would crowd a 500 page volume, which obviously I cannot do justice to today. Moreover, I have chosen to speak about AUB scholars who are not currently working for AUB. I will begin with scholars who were faculty members at the time of the founding of AUB.

- 1- Dr. Cornelius Van Dyck, a medical doctor, who mastered the Arabic language and wrote a book in Arabic called *Amradh El-Ayn* (Eye Diseases). He, with Eli Smith and *al-muallem* Butrus Al-Bustani,

translated the Bible into Arabic. Van Dyck Hall is named after him. Dr. Van Dyck started with the University when it was still in Abeih. In addition to being a true scholar, Van Dyck, along with other doctors like John Wortabet—who was born in Sidon, the son of an Armenian priest and Arabic linguist, and George Post and Harry Dorman—played effective roles in the teaching of medicine and the establishment of the AUB medical school.

- 2- In his book, *That They May Have Life*, President Stephen Penrose says that *al-muallem* Butrus al-Bustani taught at Abeih and was in charge of “preparatory work which was taken care of by association with the National School [*Madrasa al-Wataniya*] of Mr. Butrus Bustani.” This scholar learned English, Italian, Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Syriac, and Latin together with some French. Not only that, Al-Bustani authored the biggest-yet Arabic dictionary, *Muhit al-Muhit* and its abridgment, *Qutr al-Muhit*, as well as a monumental Arabic encyclopedia. Where did *al-muallem* find all this time to achieve these towering works? This is truly amazing. Henry Jessup, an AUB missionary and theologian, wrote: “When Al-Bustani died in 1883, he was considered the most learned, industrious, and successful—as well as the most influential man of modern Syria.”

- 3- El-Sheikh Nassif al-Yazighi: An outstanding scholar who taught Arabic at AUB. El-Sheikh Nassif wrote a book called *Majma' Al-Bahrain* (مجمع البحرين), which consisted of a series of *maqamat*, or rhythmic poems. Yet his brilliance is demonstrated by including in these *maqamat*, poems

Former AUB professor Nadim Nueimeh, who is currently affiliated with Balamand University, wrote in his book, *Modernity and Heritage* (الحدائثة والتراث), published in 1997, that *Majmaa El-Bahrain* was taken to al-Mufti Al-Sheikh Abdel El-Hadi Naja El-Ebbyari of Egypt for evaluation. El-Mufti El-Ebbyari, who was shocked (صُعق) by the genius of Al-Yazighi, wrote a poem praising his brilliance.

ما سمعنا بمثله عيسويًا يتحدّى بمثل معجز أحمد
ألمعِيُّ لکنه عيسويُّ كان اولی بفضل دين محمد

[Translation:] Never heard of a Christian as challenging in the language of the Quran. He is brilliant, yet it would have been better had he been a Muslim.

I am told by Dean Maroun Kisirwani and by Professor Emeritus Kamal Salibi, that El-Sheikh Nassif was dismissed from AUB because he insisted on bringing his nargileh (ارقيلة) to the classroom. I am told also that at the time of President Daniel Bliss, no smoking was allowed on the entire campus, and faculty members used to go to Bliss Street to smoke a cigarette.

4- Professor Emeritus Kamal Salibi, probably the best scholar AUB has ever had in the humanities. There are 32 manuscripts to his credit at Jafet Library. In addition to his scholarship as an eminent historian, Professor Salibi is a musician and a playwright. After his retirement from AUB, he was chosen by his Highness Prince Hassan of Jordan to head a program in religious studies in Amman, Jordan, where he excelled as

5- Professor Khalil Hawi—an outstanding original poet. I realize that I would be treading on fire when I venture to say that it would not be an exaggeration to consider Khalil Hawi as the most brilliant of the contemporary poets of modernity such as, Abdel-Wahhab El-Bayyati, Badr Shakr Assyyab, Boulend El-Hydari, Adonis, Yousef El-Khal, and others. I had the honor of taking Arabic 201 with Khalil Hawi. He did not belabor the details of the Arabic language to the point of *Mutu wa fi Nafsi Shie'aunn min Hatta*, but he introduced his students to T. S. Eliot (*The Waste Land*, "The "Hollow Men,") and other prominent poets of the West by asking us to translate the poetry of these great Western poets into Arabic. Hawi's poem *El-Bahhar wa Darouish* " is probably one of his best. Two of his books of poetry stand out: *Nahr El-Ramad* and *El-Nayu was Reeh.*"

6- The modern Arab cultural movement can proudly point to the fine scholarship of Emeritus Professor Ihsan Abbas, whose monumental bibliographic works of Arab heritage include close to 170 publications that vary from bibliographic works like Ibn Khillikan's "Wafyyat El-

Ayyan,” to many MA theses guided by him, to books on various Arab poets and Andalusian poetry in particular. He was a gentleman and a scholar.

- 7- Professor Emeritus Costas H. Issidorides, the founder of modern chemical research at AUB and the codiscover of the Beirut Reaction, a process by which a simple chemist can make hundreds if not thousands of heterocyclic compounds which possess anti-bacterial properties. He has more than 40 patents to his name which brought scientific fame to AUB as well as substantial income. Having heard many lecturers in US universities and at numerous international conferences, Professor Issidorides was the best teacher of this discipline I ever knew. He is the professor of professors. Vice President Emeritus Samir Thabet and the late Professor George Hanania contributed significantly to the establishment of a research tradition in the chemistry department as well.
- 8- Professor Emeritus Edward (Ted) Kennedy, a prolific publisher in the field of Islamic mathematics and astronomy who knew Farsi, old Turkish, Greek, French, German, and Arabic in addition distinguished English as related to me by his former research assistant, Mr. Fuad Iskander Haddad, former budget director of AUB. After retiring from AUB, Professor Kennedy spent some two years in Aleppo, Syria and later joined the Advanced Science Institute at Princeton University. He passed away recently at the age of 97. I remember him as a straight shooter at the FAS faculty meetings. When he was unhappy about a junior administrator's decision on some issue of academic importance, and knowing that this administrator was well protected by a senior

administrator, Kennedy would stand up and ,after scratching his thin hair, he would say: Mr. Dean: As they say in Lebanon, كلب المير مير and would then proceed to state his objection for discussion and consideration by the house.

9- Professor Emeritus Abdul-Mun'im Talhouk, who graduated from Munich University, distinguished himself in the field of entomology. According to Professor Nasri Kavar, Professor Talhouk discovered more than 80 species while conducting research in Lebanon, Syria, and Saudi Arabia (1941-1997). Of these, 14 species were named *Talhouki* , yet one stands out when Professor Talhouk discovered a tiny insect which turned out to be a new genus and was named *Mufaga'a Talhouki*. He had the largest collection of butterflies and insects, which he donated to AUB's Department of Biology.

10- Professor John Batatu, a Harvard graduate, a distinguished social scientist whose books on Iraq and Syria are musts for any scholar who wishes to understand the modern political, social order, and history of those two countries. His two most important books are *The Old Social Classes and Revolutionary movements of Iraq:...*—1,283 pages, and *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables and Their Politics*, both published by Princeton University Press. He left AUB during the last stages of the recent Lebanese civil war to be appointed professor with tenure at Georgetown University, a well known private university in the United States. The late Professor Batatu was highly sensitive to noise, and may be that is why he used to rent a small house in Chemlan to avoid the hustle and bustle of Ras Beirut. I will

relate to you an anecdote, a true story about him. At the beginning of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, a shop owner on Bliss Street, in the Edison Building across the street from Jessup Hall, where Professor Batutu's office was on the second floor and the dean of Arts and Sciences office on the third floor as they stand today. The owner of the shop, who is still there today, got himself a watch dog to guard his merchandise, and every time a bullet was shot nearby the dog would bark loudly in the quiet neighborhood. This barking annoyed Professor Batatu to the point that he climbed the stairs to the third floor, where he found Professor Landry Slade, then associate dean of Arts and Sciences. John complained bitterly about this dog across the street and asked Professor Slade if he could do something about this impolite dog, who was preventing Professor Batatu from concentrating on his work. At that point, Associate Dean Slade reached for his filing cabinet, pulled out a file, opened it, and said to Professor Batatu: "John, this is my job specification. Please read. It does not say dog catcher." Another anecdote about Professor Batatu: During one of the student riots in Beirut in the nineteen seventies, Professor Batatu answered the door at his house in Chemlan to find police, who rushed into his house, searched it, and dragged him to the police station in Souk El-Gharb. The officer in charge lifted the phone receiver and shouted, presumably talking to his superior at the other end of the line, "We have him here, and we found a communist book at his house." Professor Batatu tried in vain to correct the police officer by telling him, "A book *about* communism," but the officer would not budge. Apparently, the superior officer gave orders to let professor Batatu go free. Having put the telephone down, the Souk-el-Gharb junior officer looked at this simple grey-haired, short man, and with a sense of

bewilderment, said, pointing a finger at Batatu: “You incite students to riot! I cannot believe it; you look like an orthodox priest to me! (هيئتك خوري اورثودكس) The secular yet Protestant Professor Batatu took it as a compliment.

We lost Professor Batatu to cancer a few years ago.

11- Professor Emeritus George Fawaz: An outstanding pharmacologist whose wisdom was well respected and highly valued among his colleagues and the university faculty and administration at large. He has a patent to his name and many publications in internationally refereed journals.

12- Professor Emeritus Sami Fuad Haddad: I am told by Professor Joseph Simaan that Professor Haddad was the first neurosurgeon who was board certified to do neurosurgery, as he was trained at the hands of the father of neurosurgery Dr. Penfield who was at McGill Children’s Hospital. The AUB Faculty of Medicine has established a memorial lecture called, the Penfield lecture, in honor of Dr. Penfield, delivered yearly at the AUB Middle East Medical Assembly. Professor Sami Fuad Haddad has published extensively in his field of specialization. He is also well known for his sense of humor.

13- Professor Vasken Derkaloustian, who is currently in Montreal, Canada, and who while at AUB distinguished himself by publishing heavily in internationally refereed journals results on the then untapped genetics of the Lebanese population. Professor Avadis Khachadourian deserves

recognition for his research on hyperlipidemia as well. Professor Usamah Khalidi is known for his research in biochemistry

14- Professor Charles Abou Charar: A distinguished pharmacognosist, a researcher and a great teacher with a saintly zeal. He would be seen around campus showing to his pharmacy and later biology students, and teaching them about the large variety of plants on campus. During the Lebanese civil strife, he was requested to compile a booklet about the AUB campus shrubs because there was a feeling that these shrubs might disappear for lack of care. He took the time and effort to do that. We now have his booklet, *The Woody Plants of the Campus of the American University of Beirut* (1991) as an AUB publication. It is rather interesting to add that in 1986, the AUB administration asked the Lebanese Ministry of Education to honor two retiring professors: Costas Issidorides of Chemistry and Charles Abou Charar of Biology. Indeed, an official of the office of the Director General of the Ministry of Education handed two pure gold medals during a ceremony at Marquand House, to each professor, and we were told, that at the time, those two medals were the only two left in the stock of the ministry. I was thrilled to read and translate into English for Professor Issidorides what was written on the back of the gold medal in very fine Arabic font: “*Ifftah Madrasatun Toughligh siggnun.*” Do they still make this kind of beautiful medal?

I am honored to be a speaker on this very special day—I say very special because I am speaking in the presence of a descendent of Daniel Bliss, our president, Peter Dorman. This university is a collective concern indeed.

Long live AUB, long live Lebanon!

