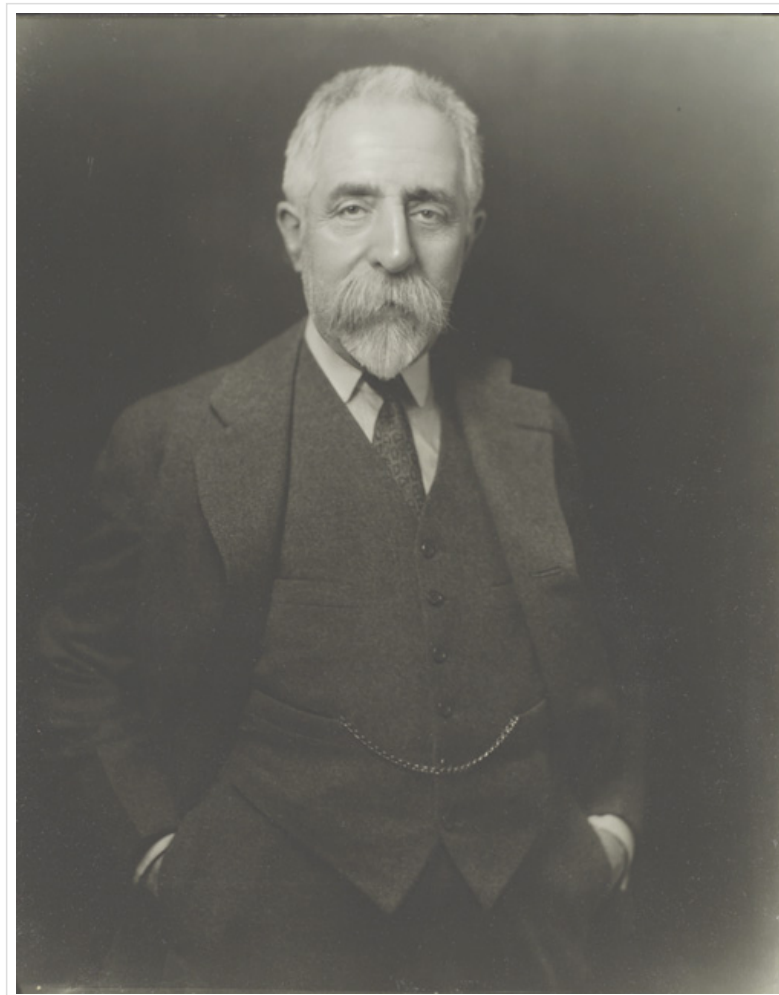


Islamic Books

A Research Blog about Manuscripts, Printed Books, and Ephemera in Arabic Script

Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at Columbia University, 1886-1959

The history of Oriental Studies at Columbia University began in 1886 when Richard J. H. Gottheil (1862-1936, CC 1881, [Dr. phil. Universität Leipzig 1886](#)) and A. V. Williams Jackson (1862-1937, CC 1883, A.M. 1884, L.H.D. 1885, Ph.D. 1886), two alumni of Columbia College with a German graduate training, were first hired to teach Semitic and Indo-Iranian languages, respectively.



In 1887, [Temple Emanu-El](#) established for Gottheil a chair of Semitic languages and Rabbinical literature; the congregation covered the costs of this professorship for the first five years, and afterwards the University made the position permanent. From 1897 until 1936, Gottheil also served as the first director of the renowned [Oriental Division](#) of the New York Public Library.



Jackson held for twenty years, from 1886 until 1906, appointments in Columbia's Department of English, where he had conducted his graduate work in historical philology, studying English, Anglo-Saxon, Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, and Avestan. In 1889 he became instructor of Anglo-Saxon, and was made adjunct professor of English language and literature in 1891. Jackson received a second appointment in 1895, when he succeeded his teacher Edward D. Perry (1854-1938), Columbia's first professor of Sanskrit (1891-1895).

Gottheil and Jackson had attended Columbia College at the same time as Nicholas Murray Butler (1862-1947, CC 1882, A.M. 1883, Ph.D. 1884), and so they both enjoyed a good working relationship with Columbia's powerful twelfth president (1902-1945). But only Jackson, who was an Episcopalian, felt a deep affection for his Alma Mater. In 1888, Jackson's sister Sarah Katherine Jackson (d. 1896) had married his Serbian classmate Michael Idvorsky Pupin (1858-1935), and they had one daughter. Pupin was an inventor and pioneer of modern physics who played a key role in founding Columbia's Department of Electrical Engineering in 1889. Gottheil, whose father Gustav Gottheil (1827-1903) was an influential Reform rabbi, experienced Columbia as a Christian anti-Semitic institution. In 1898, Gottheil initiated the foundation of a Zionist student society, called Z.B.T., which in 1903 became [Zeta Beta Tau](#) in order to serve as Greek-letter fraternity for Jewish students. Gottheil's brother William Samuel Gottheil (1859-1920) was a physician who in 1912 was appointed professor of dermatology at Fordham University.

From the 1850s onwards, Columbia was actively expanding its academic mission. The process of transforming a small parochial college into a full-fledged research university began with the establishment of Columbia's first professional schools: the Law School in 1858 and the School of Mines in 1864. But it was the vision of Frederick A. P. Barnard (1809-1889), a Yale graduate who became Columbia's tenth president (1864-1889), to open the college to students other than the sons of New York's Episcopalian and Dutch-Reformed elites. In 1887 Columbia and Temple Emanu-El reached an agreement to endow a Jewish Studies professorship for Gottheil. Since Barnard did not succeed in gaining women the admission to Columbia College, Barnard College was founded in 1889 to give women access to a comprehensive liberal arts education. Teachers College, established in 1887 as the first professional school of education in the U.S., became affiliated with Columbia in 1898. During the next decades Teachers College gradually increased the numbers of women, African-Americans, Jews, and Roman Catholics admitted to its graduate programs, diversifying Columbia's student population in the process. Nonetheless, Columbia University with its College and professional schools remained the institution of the highest echelons of New York society, setting it apart from NYU and CUNY.

Throughout their distinguished careers, Gottheil and Jackson cooperated to further research in Semitic and Indo-Iranian languages at Columbia. Both had joined the [American Oriental Society](#) in the 1880s. But when they were first hired in 1886, Jackson was a member of the Department of English, and Gottheil contributed to the University's graduate instruction in the modern European languages and literatures. Columbia's Faculty of Philosophy was established in 1890, and in 1896, its Division of Oriental Languages was formed, with Gottheil and Jackson heading their own departments of Semitic and Indo-Iranian languages, respectively. The new division united their course offerings in Semitic and Indo-Iranian languages, and allowed them to expand their curricula. The division now offered Armenian and Turkish as contemporary Middle Eastern languages, as well as methodology courses in epigraphy and linguistics. Students who wanted to obtain advanced degrees in an Oriental language were required to take a course on the principles of general linguistics. While Gottheil and Jackson belonged to the group of Columbians who adapted German concepts of humanistic inquiry such as *Religionsgeschichte*, *historisch-vergleichende Sprachwissenschaft*, and *Philologie* to their Columbia curricula, Franz Boas (1858-1942) established anthropology as a new scientific discipline. In 1902, Jackson and Gottheil joined Boas in an enthusiastic welcome for the endowment of Columbia's first Dean Lung Chair of Chinese, as it added a new department to their Division of Oriental Languages. The three scholars agreed that the contemporary languages of Africa, Asia, and the Americas needed be taught at Columbia. But Gottheil and Jackson conceived of Oriental Studies as research on the script-based civilizations of the Near East and Asia. In contrast, Boas and his colleagues in the Department of Anthropology focused on the study of living languages in societies without writing.

Gottheil and Jackson traveled and conducted research in the Middle East and South Asia, particularly Egypt, Palestine, Iran, and India. Gottheil served as the director of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem in the academic year 1909-1910, and in 1913 he was among those whom Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) considered as ambassador to Constantinople, an appointment eventually given to Henry Morgenthau, Sr. (1856-1946). In 1918, Jackson traveled to Iran as a member of the American-Persian Relief Commission. After the establishment of the American School of Oriental Research in Baghdad in 1923, he belonged to its board of trustees.

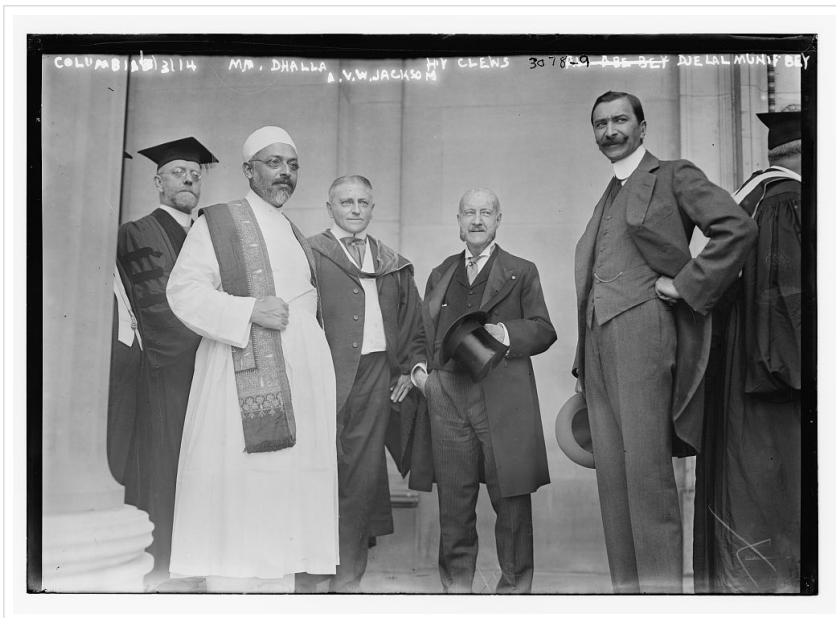
Gottheil was particularly interested in Syriac, while Jackson focused on Zoroastrianism. But both men also taught courses on Islamic history and civilization, while publishing on matters such as art, poetry, and contemporary politics in the Middle East and South Asia. In 1935, when David Eugene Smith (1860-1944), a retired professor of mathematics at Teacher's College and bibliophile, organized Columbia's contribution to the millennial celebrations for Abū'l-Qāsim Firdawsī (d. 1019 or 1024 CE), both Gottheil and Jackson worked with Smith on his project. Their graduate programs brought students such as Abraham Yohannan (1853-1925, [Ph.D. Columbia 1900](#)), Maneckji Nusservanji Dhalla (1875-1956, [Ph.D. Columbia 1908](#)), and Philip K. Hitti (1886-1978, [Ph.D. Columbia 1915](#); cf. his *New York Times* obituary, 28 December 1978) to Morningside Heights. There is, however, little evidence that Muslim students from the Middle East and South Asia worked with Gottheil or Jackson. Moreover, neither man seems to have been aware of Muslim African-Americans despite the proximity of Columbia's Morningside Campus to Harlem.

The Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress owns many images of the new Columbia campus at Morningside Heights. The University had moved from its campus at East 49th Street and Madison Avenue in 1897, even though the work on Low Library was not yet completed. The [two aerial photographs](#) were probably taken in 1903, and the interior view of [Low Library](#) is tentatively dated 1904; all three belong to the Division's collection of the Detroit Publishing Company.





The Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress also holds a series of press photographs, taken by the Bains News Agency, of the Columbia Commencement, 3-4 June 1914.



This photo shows Jackson with his student Dhalla, the financier Henry Clews (1836-1923), and Djelal Munif Bey (d. 1919), the Ottoman Consul General in New York; the other two men are unidentified. Between 1910 and the outbreak of the First World War in the summer of 1914, five Ottoman students were enrolled at Columbia (Central Files, box 543, folder 3). On March 7, 1910, the Trustees had decided that “for a term of ten years exemption from the regular tuition fees be granted to students from the Turkish Empire, not exceeding three students in any one year, who may be nominated by the Turkish government and recommended by the American Ambassador at Constantinople.” Between June and October 1910, letters were exchanged between Columbia, U.S. diplomats, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Rifaat Pasha, and the Minister of Public Instruction Emrullah Efendi. The diplomatic exchange with the Ottoman officials was conducted in French. Subsequently five Ottoman students enrolled at Columbia, but after one year, in Fall 1911, the Ottoman officials informed the University that because of an unexpected budget shortfall no tuition fees would be paid for these five students for the academic year 1911-1912. The preserved documents, which include excerpts of the written evaluation of their progress as of Spring 1914, do not indicate how the matter was solved. The correspondence breaks off after August 18, 1914.



On another photo, Bains News Agency only identified Aristides Agramonte y Simoni (1868-1931), a Cuban-American physician and bacteriologist whom Columbia awarded a honorary Doctor of Science degree for his research on the transmission of Yellow Fever. But the second person on the left is probably Gottheil.

Both Gottheil and Jackson were married, and neither man had children of his own. Gottheil married in September 1891 Emma Léon, a widow with two boys. Emma had been born in Beirut in 1862 as one of the three children of Rahamim and Hadassah Yehuda. In 1874 Emma was brought to Paris to further her education, and later her father moved the whole family to France. In New York Emma Gottheil began to lecture on contemporary French literature, and later she became actively involved with the Zionist movement (“Mrs. R. J. Gottheil: A Zionist Worker,” *New York Times*, 13 June 1947). The Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America holds an undated portrait of Emma Gottheil taken by Bachrach Photography (PNT G0632).



Jackson married Dora Ritter of Yonkers, New Jersey, in 1899. Dora Jackson wrote poetry (e.g., "I wonder why," *The Outlook*, 27 April 1901) and died of pneumonia in November 1909. In May 1911, Jackson married Kate O'Brien Brigham (b. 1870) of Savannah, Georgia. Kate Jackson was a member of the American Oriental Society, and accompanied her husband on all his travels. In 1920, Jackson arranged for the private publication of the letters that his wife had written in 1918 when the couple traveled to Iran as members of the American-Persian Relief Commission.

Columbia's graduate school admitted women, and both Gottheil and Jackson encountered women graduate students. In the preface of her dissertation (p. v) the historian Dora Askowith (1884-1958) mentioned Gottheil as one of the professors who provided criticism and suggestions ([Ph.D. Columbia 1915](#)). Probably one of the first South Asian women to obtain a graduate degree in Indo-Iranian languages from Columbia University was [Bapsy Dastur Cursteji Pavry \(1902-1995, M.A. Columbia 1925\)](#), the later [Marchioness of Winchester](#). Bapsy and her brother Jai Dastur Cursteji Pavry (1899-1985, [Ph.D. Columbia 1926](#)) belonged to a wealthy Zoroastrian family in Bombay (Mumbai), and American newspapers noted when the siblings left New York City for Britain (Roger Batchelder, "The Sidewalks of New York," *Boston Daily Globe*, 1 August 1925) and India (*New York Times*, 28 December 1925 and 29 December 1925), respectively. Bapsy Pavry drew on her Columbia masters essay to publish in 1930 an illustrated book about the heroines of the *Shāhnāmah*, and afterwards the London weekly magazine *The Bystander* featured "a new portrait of Miss Bapsy Pavry, the talented and beautiful daughter of the Parsi High Priest of Bombay" on the cover (20 August 1930, no. 1392, vol. CVII).

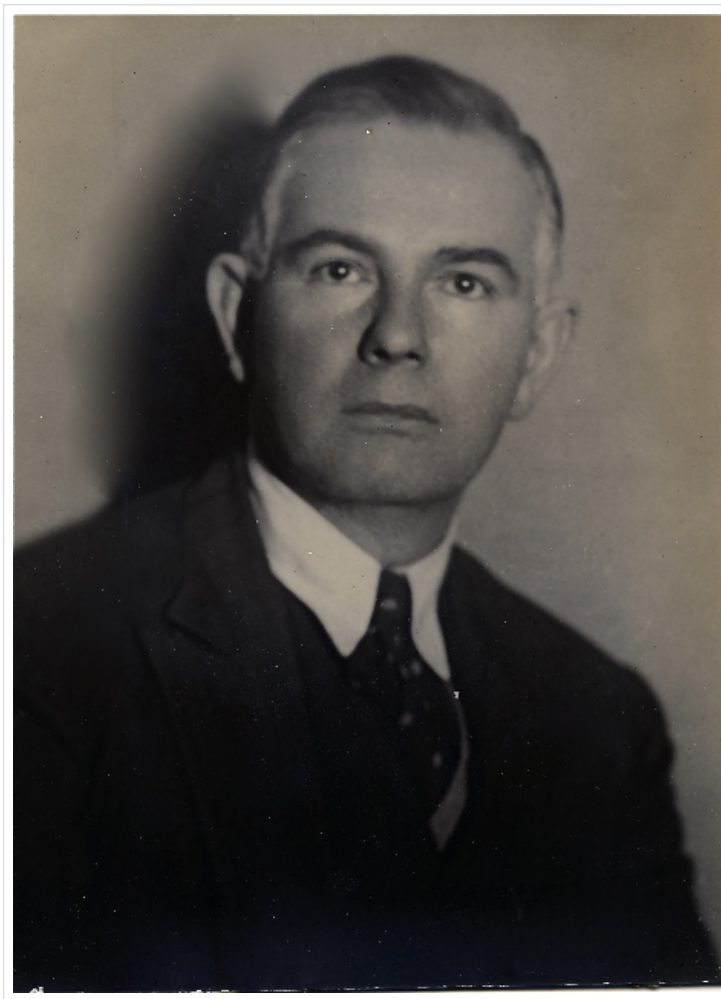


Jackson's health declined in the early 1930s, and in 1935 he retired. Gottheil passed away in 1936, before retirement. At the time of their death, Gottheil and Jackson had received national and international recognition for their work, and the *New York*

Times honored them with substantial obituaries (Gottheil, 23 May 1936, see also "Services are Held for Prof. Gottheil," *New York Times*, 26 May 1936; Jackson, 9 August 1937). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Gottheil has an entry in the *American National Biography* which summarizes his achievements as an important American Zionist and a pioneer of Jewish Studies at American universities. In contrast, Jackson is completely forgotten in North America, even though he still has an entry in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. In 2004, when Columbia celebrated its two-hundred-fiftieth anniversary, both men were absent from the institutional history of their Alma Mater.

Jackson's career witnessed the emergence of linguistics as a discipline distinct from philology. Since Jackson taught courses on the history of Indo-Iranian languages, in 1896 linguistics was added to the new Division of Oriental Languages. But already the following year, Columbia established its first Department of Linguistics. Toward the end of his tenure, in 1931, Jackson's Department of Indo-Iranian Languages transformed itself into the Department of Indo-Iranian and Comparative Linguistics. In 1926, Jackson's student Louis H. Gray (1875-1955, [Ph. D. Columbia 1900](#)) had joined the department as professor of Oriental languages. Gray's research focused on the comparative study of Semitic and Indo-European languages, and in 1935, when he was promoted to Jackson's chair, he became professor of Comparative Linguistics.

The advent of both Religious Studies and Area Studies can be dated to the tenure of Arthur Jeffery (1892-1959), an Australian specialist of Arabic linguistics and Quran Studies. Jeffery was an ordained Methodist minister, and during the First World War, he taught at Madras Christian College in India. He received degrees from the University of Melbourne (B.A. 1918, M.A. 1920, B.Th. 1926) and Edinburgh University (Ph.D. 1929, D.Litt. 1938). In 1921 he joined the School of Oriental Studies at the American University in Cairo, where he had the opportunity to work with colleagues at Egyptian institutions, such as Aziz S. Atiya (1898-1988) and Joseph Schacht (1902-1969), while meeting visiting scholars, for example Gotthelf Bergsträsser (1886-1933). In 1937, Jeffery came to Columbia as visiting professor, and succeeded Gottheil as professor of Semitic languages in 1938, receiving appointments at both Columbia University and [Union Theological Seminary](#). Jeffery was deeply involved with Columbia's Religious Studies curricula, which were overseen by the Department of Philosophy until 1949, when an independent Department of Religion was added to the Faculty of Philosophy.



Throughout his tenure Jeffery pursued the reorganization of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies within Columbia's Faculty of Philosophy. After Gray's retirement in 1944, Jeffery served as acting chair of the Department of Indo-Iranian and Comparative Linguistics. In 1947, the French structuralist André Martinet (1908-1999) was appointed as professor of Linguistics, taking over from Jeffery as executive officer of the department, which in 1948 changed its name to Department of General and Comparative Linguistics. From 1945, after the end of the Second World War, until his sudden death in 1959 (*New York Times*, 5 August 1959), Jeffery tried hard to recruit an outstanding Iranian Studies scholar as Jackson's successor. He arranged

visiting professorships for Walter B. Henning (1908-1967), Bernhard Geiger (1881-1964), S. H. Shafaq, Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin (1910-2012), Stig Wikander (1908-1983), and Ehsan Yarshater (1920-2018). Subsequent offers for a permanent position were declined by Henning and Duchesne-Guillemin, but Yarshater, a professor at the University of Tehran who was also working under Henning on a [second Ph.D.](#) from the University of London, joined the Columbia faculty in 1960. In 1961, Yarshater was appointed to the newly endowed Kevorkian Chair of Iranian Studies, and Hamid Dabashi (b. 1951) succeeded Yarshater in 1990.

In 1954, Jeffrey was appointed as the first chair of the newly formed Department of Near and Middle Eastern Languages which then comprised the Divisions of Semitic, Turkish, and Indo-Iranian Languages.

Gottheil, Jackson, and Jeffery, all three took an active interest in the development of library resources for research and teaching, and Columbia University Libraries purchased their substantial research libraries from the widows.

After the Second World War, Columbia embarked on adding the professional training in Area Studies to its portfolio. In October 1945, Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890-1969) succeeded Butler as University President, but he only assumed office in May 1948 and resigned after winning the U.S. presidential election of 1952. The German refugee Ernst Jäckh (1875-1959) had already circulated among Columbia faculty a blueprint for organizing research on contemporary Middle East politics in the early 1940s. In 1946, the political scientist Schuyler C. Wallace (1898-1969) became the first director of the new School of International Affairs. Eisenhower took an active interest in Area Studies (for the case of Iran, see "Columbia to found Iran Study Center," *New York Times*, 20 December 1949), and in the early 1950s the Middle East Institute and its Centers for Israeli, Iranian, Pakistan, and Turkish Studies were established within the School of International Affairs.

The appointments of Schacht and Yarshater marked the beginning of a new era for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at Columbia University, although their own research was not at all aimed at reinventing their disciplines. The rupture, however, becomes visible in retrospect. Schacht and Yarshater joined the University when the civil rights movement at home, the escalating war in Vietnam, and the tripartite division of the world into Capitalist West, Communist East, and Third World forced Americans to confront the complex interdependence between race, power, and knowledge in new ways. The ensuing conversation about the 1960s challenges to U.S. society raised in due course important new questions of how U.S. universities could ethically approach the study of non-American societies and their civilizations. Since the late 1970s this critical discourse has been primarily associated with the work of Edward W. Said (1935-2003) who had joined Columbia's Department of English and Comparative Literature in 1963.

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