

Acceptance Speech of
PROFESSOR CAROLE HILLENBRAND
Winner of the 2005
King Faisal International Prize for Islamic Studies
Sunday 10 April 2005 (1.3.1426H.)

Your Royal Highness, Prince Sultan Ibn Abd Al Aziz
Your Royal Highnesses
Your Excellencies
Distinguished Guests

Dear Friends,

I am deeply honoured to receive the King Faisal International Prize in Islamic studies. This most prestigious prize is the highest scholarly award in the Arab world in my chosen field of study. I know that by this award I am joining a group of the most distinguished scholars in Islamic studies. I feel humble and happy in equal measure; I certainly did not expect to be honoured in this way. For me this award underlines the fact — so often forgotten — that scholarship knows no boundaries, whether of nation, religion or any other category. I am delighted that my work has been appreciated and valued so positively amongst the highest levels of Muslim scholars. My presence here is the crowning moment of my academic career.

Many people have supported me in all sorts of ways in the course of the research which is celebrated by this prize. It is therefore a source of abiding pleasure to me to receive this prize, not only for myself, but also on behalf of my husband, my family and my colleagues in the department of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, where I have worked — first as a postgraduate student and then as a member of the academic staff — for over thirty years. My university has been teaching Arabic for more than 250 years and its standing in Islamic studies is internationally recognized. Indeed, Edinburgh was ranked first in Britain among all the departments of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies for its research achievements in the most recent country-wide Research Assessment Exercise of 2001. The award of the King Faisal International Prize is therefore the jewel in our crown. Since hearing about the award of this prize, the whole university has been talking about this wonderful news and feeling a deep sense of pride and delight at the way in which the committee of the King Faisal Prize has brought distinction not just to me but to us all.

In my research on the Crusades I have immersed myself deeply in the medieval Arabic sources — chronicles, speeches, poetry, letters, sermons – written during the two centuries of the Frankish presence in the Muslim lands of Syria, Palestine and Egypt. From my reading and analysis of these texts, many of them little known to western scholars, and especially to those who do not know Arabic, I have tried to shed light on aspects of the crusading conflict which had long been neglected in western scholarship. In particular, I wanted to illuminate the Muslim side of this long conflict. I hoped thereby to make a contribution to a better understanding of the Islamic world in the West, and to do so through the lessons of history. Indeed, those who ignore the mistakes of the past are destined to

repeat them in the future. Recent enrolments in Arabic and in Islamic studies at Edinburgh have seen a dramatic and unprecedented rise. So the time is ripe for educating a new generation that is hungry to know more about other cultures and other faiths, and sees such knowledge as essential in our global community. My western background of course means that my view of the Arab world is that of an outsider. But I am happy to say that it is a world which I have visited often, which I have studied almost every day and which has been an abiding source of pleasure, interest, and indeed fascination for well over thirty years.

The award of this prize will enable me to continue my studies of the sixth and seventh centuries hijri, to visit libraries and museums in the Arab world and to look at unpublished manuscripts and artefacts from this endlessly interesting period. I hope also to establish further links with my academic colleagues in the Middle East and to organize joint symposia and conferences for our mutual benefit.

I should like to express once again my joy at receiving this prize and my deep and long-lasting gratitude to those who have bestowed it upon me. May the award of this Arab prize to a western scholar in these times of turmoil and of misunderstanding between faiths and cultures serve as a reminder of Islam's magnificent religious and cultural heritage. The knowledge and appreciation of that heritage, today as in the future, are part of the common refreshment of humanity.