

In memoriam August Jan Willem Huisman 1917-1983

by S. A. Bonebakker

It is appropriate that the first issue of a periodical dealing with manuscripts from the Near East should offer an *in memoriam* for a librarian. It is true that Huisman devoted most of his career, especially his later years, to collecting and cataloguing printed books; but it goes without saying that the value of a manuscript collection is enhanced immeasurably by the presence of books, periodicals, and printed texts which can be used for comparison and reference. In the case of most European libraries this is taken for granted. Indeed, the fame of the Leyden University Library among orientalists seems often to rest exclusively on the importance and variety of its Near Eastern manuscripts. The fact that it also houses one of the best collections of printed books is known only to scholars who stay there for longer periods. Huisman's lasting contribution to Near Eastern scholarship was to maintain and augment this impressive collection in spite of at times extreme financial and organizational difficulties. He is also known for his small but eminently useful guide to collections of Arabic manuscripts all over the world (*Les manuscrits arabes dans le monde*, Leiden 1967), which was inspired by an earlier work by G. Vajda. This volume complemented an important set of Western and Near Eastern catalogues which Huisman had brought together and which were conveniently arranged in a corner of the study room of the Legatum Warnerianum.

Huisman was born on the 22nd of October, 1917. He attended the Barlaeus Gymnasium in Amsterdam, from which he graduated in 1935. Since he intended to pursue a career in the Dutch East Indies he enrolled as a student in Colonial Law (*Indisch Recht*) in Amsterdam. As early as 1936 he took his first comprehensive exam and then transferred to Utrecht where he took his second exam in 1938. This formally completed his studies, the PhD being optional. But before the outbreak of the Second World War he decided to take also a degree in Semitic languages, and he passed his first exam on the 4th of March 1943 (on the 13th the Nazis imposed an oath of loyalty which virtually closed down all universities in the Netherlands). The second comprehensive exam came much later, in 1954. In the meantime Huisman had begun an active career in Near Eastern studies which eventually would bring him to the Leyden University Library. During the years 1943-1947 he contributed to the *Concordance et Indices de*

la Tradition Musulmane, assisted the keeper of manuscripts, Dr. C. van Arendonk, and the Director of the Oosters Instituut, Professor J. H. Kramers. Shortly after the war, in 1947, an occasion arose for him to pursue the career for which he had originally studied. He served in two important capacities in Makassar on the island of Celebes, but his work there came to an end when the Netherlands formally recognized the independence of Indonesia. Huisman had studied Arabic and Persian under the guidance of Kramers, and when in 1951 a secretary was needed to assist Kramers in his editorial work for the *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam* Huisman, who had returned to the Netherlands, became the logical choice.

Huisman's permanent association with the University Library dates from 1954: he served this institution with some interruptions for more than twenty-five years and it is in this capacity that he will best be remembered. Scholars from all over the world found in him a unique source of information and advice, and often (as in the case of the writer of these lines) a warm friend.

It will be clear to any scholar of the area that the job of a Near Eastern librarian requires not only a high degree of competence in various fields, but also an ability to withstand the boredom of consulting hundreds of sources of bibliographical information which, in the nature of things, are often repetitive. It becomes easy to allow oneself to consider anything that is added to the monotonous, but nevertheless exacting, routine to be beyond the call of duty. Huisman never allowed this to happen. There can be no doubt that his familiarity with many languages and his excellent memory facilitated his task. But to any visitor who happened to cast a glance at the piles of booksellers catalogues and reference works that habitually cluttered his desk (and for which he alone had to assume responsibility), it must have been surprising that he organized his work in a way that still allowed the outside world to interfere. The cataloguing of books, especially books from the Near East, had until the beginning of this century been carried out in a somewhat haphazard fashion; the librarian was often the only person who could locate a text if it existed. In this task Huisman always offered his help unstintingly without ever giving the impression that he had other responsibilities. He gave his findings a more permanent



A. J. W. Huisman (right) at work in the Oriental reading room in the Library of the University of Leiden, in 1963. Standing, to the left, is his assistant, Mr. A. F. Marck.

character by adding hundreds of pencil notes to the Library's copy of Brockelmann's *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, and it is to be hoped that these will someday find their way into other works of reference. His qualities as a librarian were recognized when he was sent on a UNESCO mission to Baghdad to investigate the possibility of creating a national archive there. He also travelled to other Arab countries, often visiting libraries or hunting in bookstores for one or two fascicles that were missing from the Library's periodical collection.

The indirect contributions Huisman made to Near Eastern scholarship through the advice he gave to visitors and students can of course never be measured. He resigned his post when the move of the Library to a new location became imminent because, as he put it, he realized that this move would put too much of a strain on his organizational talents. He said this without bitterness; perhaps he also realized that time was running out on him and that he needed the remaining years of his life to carry out several long-postponed projects. He continued to visit the Library and, to the delight of his friends, he seemed to enjoy his retirement without being in the slightest way embarrassed by the fact that he was working in the very same room which he had been in charge of for so many years. There had been earlier plans for a text edition which Huisman had had

to give up when it turned out that the same work had just been published by a Near Eastern scholar (a misfortune that may befall even a librarian). A new edition of his indispensable guide to manuscript libraries was completed shortly before his death and is awaiting publication. The papers found on his desk also showed plans for a work on Ibn Taymiyya, an undertaking for which his experience as an Arabist would have eminently qualified him. The last weeks of his life he was working on a new index for the *Historical Atlas*, which the editors of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* had asked him to prepare. He died suddenly on the 30th of July. On the 29th the library had been transferred to new quarters; on the evening of that same day a dinner had been held to celebrate the occasion and to honour Huisman's invaluable contributions to the Near Eastern collection. He is survived by his wife with whom he shared his many interests, one of which was a modest but very attractive collection of contemporary paintings and prints.

I noted earlier that Huisman never showed any emotion or bitterness, even though his life was not without disappointments. Those who knew him well sensed a concern with social issues; he was sometimes deeply moved by the difficulties of others, even those whom he knew only superficially. He tried repeatedly, and sometimes successfully, to find work for academi-



A.J.W. Huisman in his private study, after his retirement from the Library, working on the second edition of his *Bibliography*. Leiden 1982. Photograph by Adnan J. Al-Toma.

cally qualified foreigners who had not succeeded in finding employment in their native countries and who had emigrated to the Netherlands as guest workers. He delighted colleagues and visitors with his sparkling wit and humor and his ability to create a hospitable atmosphere in the section of the Library which he di-

rected; there nothing seemed difficult or impossible, and unnecessary regulations were often ignored. His many friends will continue to draw inspiration from a life which was directed towards the service of others in a charming and modest way that was uniquely his. In this sense he is still among us.