

“With All Good Wishes”



REMEMBERING PATRICIA CRONE (1945-2015)*

Reminiscences by:

Karen Bauer, *Institute of Ismaili Studies*

Bella Tendler Krieger, *Florida International University*

Deborah Tor, *University of Notre Dame*

Kevin Van Bladel, *Ohio State University*

I think that everyone whose work was critiqued by Patricia must have a story to tell. As a graduate student, I would

cry for days on end every time I received her feedback on one of my chapters. My enduringly favorite phrase, “This page is

*A formal obituary was published by the Institute for Advanced Study: <https://www.ias.edu/crone-obituary>. For a bibliography of Patricia Crone’s work, please see *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone*, edited by B. Sadeghi, A.Q. Ahmed, A. Silverstein, and R. Hoyland (Leiden: Brill, 2015), xxiv-xxix.

(Photo courtesy of Leiden University)

full of horrors!”), referred to my appalling grammar. I also got (more than once!) “I can’t go on; please rewrite and tell me what you actually mean”. It was rough going. But in the end, it worked. I learned. And I think that was the beauty of Patricia’s critiques: I doubt that it occurred to her that these sorts of phrases could be taken in any way other than constructive and professional. She was horrified when I once told her about the floods of tears that they provoked, and wondered aloud if she should re-think her strategy (of course I staunchly replied “Never!”). Her harsh language belied her essentially positive attitude, and I came to see those detailed, scathing critiques as symptomatic of this positivity, as well as of her amazing generosity. She saw that the work could be better, wanted it to be better, and would do everything she could to help me make it better. The pages-long answers to my written work were only a small part of what she gave to me as a scholar in those days. We spent hours over drinks discussing the ins and outs of some obscure point, hours with some particularly difficult texts.

In retrospect, I can see that she must have wanted to help me to become a proper scholar, and this is why she was so generous towards me. I suppose that this is how I cajoled her into reading my work on gender, something that never interested her (another favorite, scribbled, not typed: “Men have always felt this way about women!”). I had essentially no training in medieval texts when I took her seminar my first term in Princeton. I’d read a bit of al-Tabari in translation, but I’d only read modern Arabic. My lack of experience really showed! That first class was so very, very hard as everyone else seemed to read

the texts and understand the context; I felt bewildered. After that—perhaps seeing my lack of expertise as a monumental challenge—she offered me a readings class, and I suppose that it was while reading about recalcitrant women over pots of tea that we started to bond.

It was Stephennie Mulder who suggested the first drinks and dinner. She invited me, Teresa Bernheimer, and Patricia, and we began to have evenings all together. They always passed too quickly. The following semester, Stephennie went to U Penn, Teresa back to Oxford. I was the lucky one, left to pick up the reins of the evenings with Patricia, those evenings which were one of the best things about my time at Princeton. After I graduated, I saw her much less as I had moved to London. However, we often visited when she came to town, and particularly after her cancer diagnosis I would see her no matter what the circumstances. Ten days after the birth of my first child I dimly recall walking around the park with her trying in vain to sustain intelligent conversation in my sleep deprived and physically shattered state, as the baby slept in the pram (“He is so calm!” she said, “He certainly takes after Peter.”); another time, she wanted to go to the zoo! We were amazed at the magnificence of the tiger, but both a bit depressed after having seen him there.

Once I understood that being blunt was just her way, it made it easier to understand her underlying sentiments. At different points in conversation after my wedding, she admitted that although it had been a very lovely day, she had been expecting more Islamic studies colleagues to come, she was disappointed that the groom didn’t make a speech, and she was a bit put out that the proper walk I had

promised the next day never materialized. But then, in her practical way, she said that she thought that probably going to the wedding was an important step in our becoming friends. She was so warm and caring, but I think she must have abhorred sentimentalism. When I saw her soon after her diagnosis, I remember being astonished at how positive she seemed to be about her own demise. She explained that she had had a good life. She had done most of the work she wanted to do; the best was probably behind her. And she really didn't want to end up addled and "ga-ga": better to go sooner, rather than that.

Of course Patricia's generosity, positivity, and honesty made me love her. But I think that perhaps what made me love her best was that she combined those qualities with such a good sense of fun. She loved parties! She loved people! She loved having a laugh, as strange as that might seem to some on the receiving end of her criticisms. At times, her fantastic love of fun would flash out even in class. I can still see her pacing at the front of our seminar, doing a great impression of Ann Lambton lecturing. But of course it was the parties, the dinners, the drinks, these were the really good bits. She also loved making fun for others – she showed me how she had constructed a whole puppet theatre for neighborhood children: beautiful puppets, scenery, costumes. It was all stowed away in the top floor room, perhaps awaiting a resuscitation that never came.

When she was once going through a bad patch in treatment, she sent an email and said that she wouldn't be writing anymore. This was the "last message but one" that I was to receive. She had underestimated her own resilience. Our communication resumed as normal, but that message had

given me the impression that either before or after the end I might get some sort of a fond farewell. If she ever wrote such a thing, it never came. Our last exchange was typically pithy, blunt, perhaps just a bit gossipy. But maybe that was all for the best. Otherwise, I might have become quite soppy over it.

— Karen Bauer
Institute of Ismaili Studies

I met Patricia Crone at a dinner party in 2008 as a third-year graduate student at Princeton's Near Eastern Studies Department. At the time, she was working on the heterodox sects of early Islamic Iran for the book that would eventually become her *Nativist Prophets*. I had just completed a general examination with Michael Cook on Islamic heresiography. When she realized our shared interests, she engaged me in a conversation on religious syncretism in early Islam. We ended up talking about the *ghulāt* for well over an hour. I remember leaving that dinner, shaking with adrenaline. I could not believe that she had given so much of her time, and that she was so humble, personable, and generous.

She asked me to keep in touch with her, and I did. I would email her brief queries and within a few hours would receive lengthy expositions, more articulate than anything I could have written with months of preparation. When my questions required more attention, she would invite me for lunch at the Institute or tea in her garden. My mind was shaped by those conversations. I no longer remember which of my insights are my own and which were honed by her objections and



(Photo courtesy of Sabine Schmidtke. Copyright © IAS 2015)

clarifications.

In 2009 she taught a class on the Khurramites that I attended. Despite having worked my way through the entire library of literature on the Islamic sects, I found Patricia's class mind-blowing. She understood the material in a way that was so original and also so obvious. Her ability to synthesize information from disparate cultures and to vividly bring to life the world of early Islam made the class spectacularly fascinating. Her quick humor made it extremely fun. Patricia was fully present as a teacher. She would regularly return home from class and immediately send off an email responding to some question posed in the seminar or further clarifying an idea she felt had been insufficiently covered. It was to be her last class and, in a letter written to me in 2013, she let me know that she had "hugely enjoyed it and profited enormously from it." She also wrote that teaching students had "saved [her] life in a metaphorical sense by allowing [her] to have contact

with and teach young people again."

Eventually Patricia agreed to mentor my doctoral thesis together with Michael Cook. She became an invaluable resource and I would email her with questions several times a week. I was still shy with her back then and would often open my letters with some form of apology. She assured me that she "rather likes the email pestering," and encouraged me to "continue bothering" her. Today, I am grateful for my nerve, as I have over two hundred email exchanges with her filled with wisdom I will parse for years.

It was not always easy being her student. Patricia never minced words with me. She let me know when my ideas were sophomoric, when I lapsed into purple prose, or "abused the English Idiom." She was never cruel, though, and her harsh words were regularly followed with apologies. "I often react quite sharply," she wrote me after one particularly biting exchange, "but you shouldn't let that intimidate you." I was intimidated, but

I was also encouraged by her critique. It let me know that she respected me and wanted me to be a better scholar. It made me want to be a better scholar. Her praise, when it finally did come, was equally exuberant.

Patricia's comments were not limited only to my research. She would advise me on my weight, my exercise regime (she was extremely fit), my relationship with my family, and my place as a woman in academia. When I decided to publish my first article using a double-barreled last name, she wrote me three vehement emails insisting that I should not bandy my private life about in the workplace. She was not opposed to my having a private life, though. She celebrated the birth of my first daughter and when I told her I was expecting a second, she was so pleased for me. "If you are going to have a child, you may as well have more than one." She loved her siblings and appreciated being in a large family. They were to be her lifeline at the end.

In 2011 she invited me to be her research assistant at the Institute for Advanced Study. It was during that year that she was diagnosed with cancer. When she told me, I remember thinking, selfishly, that I was not ready to lose her; that her mentorship had been the best thing to ever happen to me, and that I did not know how to continue writing without her tutelage. I could barely look at her without crying. On her part, Patricia wanted nothing to do with my sentimentality. She did not want to dwell on her illness, she did not want it to slow her down. Between doctors' visits, she became furiously productive. I remember asking her about her holiday plans, and she responded that holidays were for uninterrupted work. She held off

getting full-brain radiation because she was worried that it would affect her mind. She could see no point in living if she could not continue to write.

When she was first diagnosed, she did not know if she would make it to my defense. She did, and I was lucky enough to have her in my life for three more years. For a while, she was still so sharp that I could almost forget that she was dying. She never did forget and she faced death with the same humor, pragmatism, and unflinching courage with which she had always faced the world. "I've had a good life," she wrote me, "it's not as though my death will be a tragedy." She continued doing the things that brought her pleasure: writing, gardening, cycling (long past when I thought she should be able), and watching opera and foreign films. Together with her sister Diana, she threw herself into the struggle to legalize medical marijuana, which she believed could have cancer shrinking effects. She also continued the mundane tasks of mentorship, writing reference letters for me and advising me through my first years of post-graduate teaching.

Patricia did not believe in an afterlife. In fact, when I asked her once about this, towards the end, she scoffed at me. "Do you think me such a coward, that I would need to embrace this idea, simply because I am dying?" Her certainty terrified me, not merely because of its existential implications (Patricia was rarely wrong), but also because I could not fathom a world in which she did not exist. Today, as I reread her letters or look at her books on my shelf, as I reminisce with fellow students or sit in front of a difficult text and wonder "what would Patricia say," I think a part of her has survived death. I

hope this part will be sufficient, as I had wanted many more years with her before having to say goodbye. She was the best of mentors and a dear friend. She will be sorely missed.

— Bella Tendler Krieger
Florida International University

E.B. White once wrote: “It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer.” Patricia was both. In fact, she was more than a good writer; she was one of the best literary stylists I have ever read. Yet even her limpid prose, with its extraordinary clarity and lucidity, fails to reflect fully the formidable power of her mind. While it is impossible to read her work without noticing that one is encountering a truly first-rate intellect, the coruscating strength of that mind was revealed completely only in live conversation with her. Patricia’s brilliance was dazzling; she had the ability to take one’s own haltingly and imperfectly expressed ideas, and to sharpen and hone them to the last degree; not only their formulation, but the very essence of the ideas themselves. One understood better what one had meant in the first place after Patricia had restated the thought.

While her fierce intelligence—oftentimes fiercely expressed—is the stuff of legend in the field, what is less well known is that Patricia had a great heart no less than a great mind. This quality was manifested in various ways. For one thing, she was extravagantly generous; in the case of younger scholars, what counted most was how lavishly she bestowed her time, her mentoring, and her unfailing and unwavering support, both moral and

material. I first encountered Patricia’s generosity when she read my dissertation in its entirety, which she was under no obligation to do; and it was as a result of her challenges that I wrote an entire extra chapter for the book that followed—probably the strongest chapter in it. Over the years, she became my ideal audience and my critic of first recourse; she knew how to bring out the best in other scholars.

Another instance of her generosity with her time occurred in 2011, when I sent Patricia the draft of an article I had written. Patricia sent me an eight-page critique and running commentary in reply, which opened a discussion, a give and take that lasted through 6 e-mail exchanges and was probably the deepest intellectual communion I have ever been privileged to experience. I have saved on my computer, just from 2009 onwards—and I by no means saved every e-mail from her, nor was I technologically savvy enough to transfer e-mails from older computers before that date—nearly 600 e-mails.

Patricia was the bravest person I have ever met. This bravery was reflected in every facet of her life: she was utterly without cant and guile, and always stated things as she perceived them to be, without fear of consequences. Her courage was put to the ultimate test after her terminal lung cancer diagnosis toward the end of 2011 and over the following years, in which she bore her sufferings and the gradual loss of her physical and mental abilities with more than Roman fortitude; with grace, dignity, dogged determination and patience. She showed us how to die well and to face death courageously, just as she had showed us how to face life courageously.

Together with Patricia’s courage, she

possessed another very rare characteristic: Patricia was genuinely humble and modest, despite her unusual gifts. I think it was because of these two qualities that she was so very open-minded, always willing to listen to ideas and arguments, and to revise and modify her own conclusions accordingly; she would immediately concede when she was wrong. She was the walking embodiment of Ezra Pound's injunction: "Seek ever to stand in the hard Sophoclean light/And take your wounds from it gladly." This humbleness and concomitant readiness to admit error is, in my experience, seldom encountered in academia.

Patricia's greatness of heart was evinced in many other ways as well: Unflagging support, the writing of endless letters of recommendation, and the investment of her time and energy in those she mentored. Whereas most senior colleagues carefully ration the time spent meeting with those they mentor, a visit with Patricia meant a leisurely afternoon in her garden or living room (in the house she loved that was, unbeknownst to Patricia, killing her with its radon), drinking tea together and conversing for hours on end. When I was experiencing a time of professional adversity, she wrote me dozens of e-mails of support, encouragement, and affirmation; her faith in me was always far greater than my own. And when I was having health troubles of my own in 2013, she, already a doomed and dying woman, sent flowers, supportive e-mails, and steadily inquired after me.

Patricia had a very strong and vivid personality, and this, together with her radiance, is perhaps the most difficult thing to capture and convey in writing. She loved humor (I can still hear her laughter

in my mind as I write this), and could be wickedly funny. She also loved gardening, tea, opera and vocal music generally (she had not much use for chamber music), her family and friends, bicycling, and England, and hated talking on telephones. She was a very warm person, and a loyal and devoted friend; and, though she vehemently disliked sentimentality and cheap emotionalism, she was easily moved.

One example of her great heart and warmth should suffice; this is an excerpt taken from the end of a long and ruminative e-mail she wrote on December 17, 2012 during an ongoing e-mail discussion of C.S. Lewis's "A Grief Observed":

*So as you see, I disagree with you about a lot of things, but it does not stop me feeling immensely (IMMENSELY) moved by your loyalty, friendship, love and admiration. I so agree about the barrier, the veil of convention and superficiality that separates us, and I feel some of it even with you when I see you in person, as I am sure you do too when you see me. But when we email there is none of it, and I find that as wonderful as you do, and did even before I had death in front of me to concentrate my mind.[....]
I have to stop.*

*With love,
Patricia*

Patricia Crone was a colossal scholar and a wonderful human being. Of her can it truly be said:

*"Against death and
all-oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth;
your praise shall still find room*

*Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out
to the ending doom.”*

It was one of the greatest privileges of my life to have known her, and to have been her friend.

— Deborah Tor
University of Notre Dame

I met Patricia Crone in 2003, when I was researching and writing my doctoral dissertation. Out of the blue, I received an e-mail message from her, inviting me to participate in a colloquium at the Institute for Advanced Study on “The Greek Strand in Islamic Political Thought,” where I would address Middle Persian sources. At the time I knew her only by reputation, and for this reason I was hesitant to accept. I had heard rumors that she was an aggressive, intimidating scholar, who reportedly had induced at least one graduate student to tears during his candidacy exams.

It baffled me that, as a graduate student, I should be invited by a stranger to participate in a colloquium packed with such well-established and learned scholars from around the world. The roster of speakers included many scholars whose works I had been trained on. But I went and I tried to make myself useful at the event by taking notes for others. Little did I know that Patricia would turn out to be a very important mentor for me, even though I was never formally her student. It was the first of three such extended colloquia of hers to which I was invited, in addition to my half-year as a member of the Institute, where she held regular Qur’an-reading sessions in her office. Through all these events she facilitated my acquaintance

with leading scholars in many different fields. I experienced the Institute for Advanced Study as a university without students, except that the professors were all the students of one another. Patricia led us in this way and set the example.

It was during these sessions, and also through correspondence and meetings at conferences, that I got to know Patricia and to admire her intellect and scholarship alike, as well as her generosity as host and as collegial interlocutor. She administered meetings that fostered the scholarship of each participant. She asked tough questions and pushed for answers with clarity. I could also see how she had earned her reputation for ferocity, though the rumors had exaggerated it. Once, when one of the invited scholars invited to her colloquium rambled on in his presentation of his dossier of texts with no purpose, going nowhere sloppily, Patricia hit the table with her palm and said with obvious frustration, “Would you get to the point?” I still think of the outburst as heroic. In principle, nobody was immune. I can’t forget the time I mistook the date of the Mu‘tazilī theologian ‘Abd al-Jabbār and she silenced me with a sharp “No!” in front of all the assembled colleagues. She herself seems to have known her reputation. When she received the Levi Della Vida Medal in Islamic Studies in 2013, she was subjected to a series of personal appreciations by colleagues assembled there. In response she said laughingly, “I had no idea you all liked me so much!” or words to that effect.

I never had the sense that it was personal when she disagreed or remained unpersuaded. There were big historical problems to solve, and we had better be serious and comprehensive in solving them.

When she realized a mistake on her part, she would correct herself. She has done this in print. Once at dinner with Patricia and Everett Rowson I asked her about the influential book she had co-written with Michael Cook, *Hagarism* (1977). Had she changed her mind about it? She didn't answer that question, but she said, "It was a work of youthful vandalism!" And she added that they had written the book at a relatively young age when she felt intense frustration with the uncritical attitude toward the sources prevalent among leading scholars then.

Patricia did not mince words. I find this admirable, too. Once I was interviewed for a prestigious fellowship at the IAS. Afterwards I found lunch on Nassau Street, and as I made my way back to my lodging, there was Patricia, riding her bicycle homeward. She saw me and immediately stopped. "You didn't get it!" she announced

without any greeting, still seated on her bike. But then followed her usual kindness as we talked a while at a nearby café about what was next in our research projects.

At one visit to Princeton in 2014, she invited me to lunch at her house. We sat in her garden, among flowers, where she provided a Mediterranean sort of meal, and we talked about other people's books and our own unproved hypotheses. We also talked a little about the cancer in her brain. Her seemingly unflinching bravery with terminal illness was remarkable. When I left that day, we exchanged a knowing glance, just slightly prolonged. We did not need to say that we both expected it would be our last meeting. It wasn't, but that was her goodbye. I think she would hate any sentimentality about it. Patricia held very high standards.

— Kevin Van Bladel
Ohio State University