



## Nabia Abbott

*Photo by Jean Grant*

Nabia Abbott, the first woman faculty member of the Oriental Institute, joined its staff in 1933 and became Professor Emeritus in 1963. When I visited her this past spring in her apartment on the Midway, I expected her to recall such aspects of her career as the discrimination that I knew she had faced as a professional woman in those pre-liberation days; her pioneering work on the position of women in the Islamic Middle East; her classic study of the rise of the North Arabic script; her massive, painstaking, and path-breaking investigations of Arabic literary papyri, which have already revolutionized the study of the culture of early Islam; or the many projects (including an extensive study of the introduction of the use of paper into the Middle East) which she was forced to abandon because of failing health. Instead, I found her hard at work on a major review of a recent book in German on an important Arabic historical papyrus document. "There are very few young scholars willing to undertake the hard labor involved in the study of Arabic papyri," she said, "and I want to write a critical review that will encourage this able young author to continue in this field and enhance it."

Nabia Abbott traveled far to reach the Oriental Institute. Born in Mardin (in southwest Turkey) on January 31, 1897, she, as yet a child, traveled with her family in a covered wagon with a caravan of nomad horsemen down to Mosul, sailed down the Tigris to Baghdad, and later through the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea to Bombay (1907). She went

to English schools; took and passed the Overseas Senior Matriculation Examination of the University of Cambridge (1915) but stayed in India during World War I; and traveled north to Lucknow's Isabella Thorbom College for Girls (an affiliate of the degree-granting University of Allahabad, whose largely British faculty set, administered, and graded the final examinations), which granted her an A.B. degree with honors (1919). Among her college colleagues were a number of India's future women leaders. Then she was called on to start a program of women's education in the nascent kingdom of Iraq, where she enjoyed the company and support of the famous Gertrude Bell. From there she followed her family to Boston. She obtained her A.M. at Boston University (1925). She then joined the faculty of Asbury College in Wilmore, Ky., taught first in the Department of Education and later became head of the Department of History (1925-33). When her family moved to Chicago, she was attracted by the courses offered by Martin Sprengling, then Professor of Arabic at the Oriental Institute.

In the period before World War II, the Oriental Institute's interest in Arabic and Islamic studies centered on the relation of these studies to the ancient Near East. The Institute housed precious early Islamic documents written on parchment, papyrus, and paper. Nabia Abbott prepared herself for working on these documents through the study of early Islamic history and philology with Martin Sprengling, and wrote a dissertation, "The Kurrah Papyri of the Oriental Institute" (1936). From 1933 on, the Oriental Institute was her home. She did not leave it except for one year, when she went to the Middle East on a sabbatical leave in 1946/47. She studied and published many of the Institute's early Islamic documents, helped it acquire others, expanded its library holdings in this area, and made full use of the opportunity it offered her to investigate and teach a subject which required utmost rigor and from which all but a handful of hardy scholars had shied away. I still recall a compatriot of mine, a graduate student of Arabic from Iraq, who thought he could read Arabic documents with ease. She placed before him one of the many glass-framed papyrus fragments she always had about in her study. When he could not make out a single word, let alone a line or a sentence, he sat speechless as she began to explain to him the type of detective work necessary for unravelling these puzzling marks—and this, of course, was just the beginning of the vast knowledge and expert handling required to throw light on such documents and make them, in turn, throw light on the broader questions of early Islamic history and culture.

Nabia Abbott is a scholar's scholar. She had the singleness of purpose and strength of character to resist the temptations that drove

many Arabists and Islamists to vulgarize their field at the expense of basic research. Today, as the chickens come back to roost and hundreds of badly trained graduates find there are no jobs to be had, it is good to remember that Nabia Abbott's breathtaking achievement was not the product of federal largess or expensive group projects, but was the result of the will and tenacity and plain hard work of an individual in an institution that set the highest standards for itself and cared for and protected its members as they went about their scholarly work. I shall never forget Robert McC. Adams, then Director of the Oriental Institute, standing at the door of Nabia Abbott's study on the eve of her retirement, the second volume of her *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri* in his hand, saying to her: "This is the kind of work for which the Oriental Institute was founded and for which it exists. I want you to know that the Institute will continue to support you and be your home as long as you are able to continue your research."

MUHSIN MAHDI

Muhsin Mahdi was Professor of Arabic and chairman of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. He is now Jewett Professor of Arabic at Harvard University.