

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on November 4, 2025,
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Roger Owen
was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

ROGER OWEN

BORN: May 27, 1935
DIED: December 22, 2018

E. R. J. Owen—simply “Roger” to his family, friends, and colleagues—died on December 22, 2018, at his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He is widely remembered and celebrated as a prolific scholar whose pioneering contributions to the study of modern Middle Eastern history have reshaped the field substantively, conceptually, and methodologically.

Born in London in 1935, Roger’s interest in the Middle East started to take shape after he was sent to Cyprus in 1955, then under British colonial rule, for his mandatory military service. While there, as he wrote in his memoirs, he “discovered how close Nicosia was by plane to Tel Aviv, East Jerusalem, Beirut and Cairo,” which initiated his travels in the region while on leaves and after demobilization. It was then that he “got really hooked on the East as a result of the heady combination of the sweet early summer evenings, Biblical ruins, and the insistent hammer of contemporary politics.” After his return to London, he briefly considered a career in the Foreign Office. Instead, he enrolled at the University of Oxford, where he earned a B.A. from Magdalen College in 1959 and a doctoral degree in social sciences, specializing in economic history, from St Antony’s College in 1965.

Roger’s distinguished career as an academic started at Oxford, where he remained until 1993, the year he joined the Department of History at Harvard University as the A.J. Meyer Professor of Middle East History. At Harvard, he taught courses on various aspects of the modern Middle East, organized workshops and conferences that brought together scholars from different disciplines and areas, and mentored many students who now occupy leading positions as academics or professionals in different parts of the United States and the world. While at Harvard, he also served the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES) as director and in many other roles as a leading member of a team of Middle East scholars who aimed to ground their field of study in the rigorous disciplines of the social and human sciences and move away from the nebulous notion of “area studies.”

Starting with Roger’s earliest publications, his work had and continues to have significant influence precisely because he represented and argued for a new approach to the Middle East

that offered a compelling critique of those that prevailed into the 1970s: namely, Orientalism and the modernization paradigm. He disparaged the assumption that “Islam,” “Islamic society,” or “traditional society” could be productive units of analysis to understand the living, changing, evolving, and highly variegated societies of the region where he continued to travel, reside for lengthy periods, and develop robust ties and friendships. In workshops he organized together with a number of like-minded intellectuals at the University of Hull, the “Hull Group,” and in journals he co-conceived and co-edited, he forged the substance and tone of that critique, which deeply informed Roger’s empirically rich and methodologically sophisticated studies in political economy.

Characterized as an “intellectual amphibian” in his Festschrift, Roger was equally comfortable as an economic and a political historian, in quantitative and qualitative analysis, and he was critical of the generalizations, essentializations, and facile theoretical discourses that both might encourage. As the titles of his books demonstrate, he gradually moved from economic to political themes, but, throughout his career, he remained true to both sides of his early focus on political economy.

Roger’s major works include: *Cotton and the Egyptian Economy, 1820–1914* (1969); *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800–1914* (1981); *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (1992); *A History of Middle East Economies in the Twentieth Century* (1999, co-authored); and *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life* (2012).

In Roger’s last decade at Harvard, he experimented with a genre, biography, that seemed like a departure from his earlier work, but, even then, he continued to ground his work in political economy. His insightful study of the life and times of Lord Cromer not only enabled him to engage with the role of the individual in history but also to take a close look at British colonial rule in Egypt and its impact on Egyptian economy and society. Also at Harvard, he slightly changed his stance vis-à-vis the media and did not shun occasionally wearing the hat of a “minor pundit,” in his own words.

Of the many awards Roger received during his distinguished career, one of the most meaningful and impactful came in 2011, when a Roger Owen Book Award was established by the Middle East Studies Association of North America. Since then, the award has been given biennially to the author of the best new monograph on “the economics, economic history, or the political economy of the Middle East and North Africa.”

A towering intellectual, Roger was also blessed with the lasting friendship of his colleagues and students, who not only benefited from his learning and his generously critical insights into their work or into world affairs but also, and famously, enjoyed his good company. Even in his final years, when he bravely weathered a progressive illness, Roger did not give up on his active social and intellectual life. He was an unfailingly engaging conversationalist, not a

talker, definitely not “royalty.” His post-retirement presence at CMES in weekly breakfast meetings with students, staff, and colleagues, known as “Bagels with Roger,” is remembered for his effortless displays of deep wisdom, sparkling wit, and sheer fun. He is still regarded as the dean of economic historians of the Middle East.

Roger is survived by three children, Kate, Ben and Isabel, seven grandchildren, and one great-grandchild.

Respectfully submitted,

Rosie Bsheer
William Graham, Jr.
William Granara
Roy Mottahedeh†
Cemal Kafadar, Chair