

DEVIN A. DEWEESE

A leading scholar of Islamic Studies and one of the world's most prominent researchers in his field, Devin is retiring from Indiana University, his academic home for most of his adult life. Devin graduated from IU with undergraduate degrees in history and religious studies in 1977. He continued for an M.A. (1979) in religious studies and then a Ph.D. (1985) from the Department of Uralic and Altaic Studies (renamed Central Eurasian Studies in 1993). He later joined the ranks of the department's faculty and continued to conduct research, teach, and also lead for a decade our Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, the top research institute of its kind in America.

Devin is one of IU's most prolific researchers. In his many groundbreaking contributions to the study of Islam, he has offered new ways of evaluating processes of Islamization and how they shaped religion, society, and the foundations of communal identities from medieval times to the present. Devin is widely regarded as the preeminent scholar of Sufism in Central Asia. Among his accolades, he was a Guggenheim Fellow, a Carnegie Fellow, an American Council of Learned Societies Fellow, and a National Council for Soviet and East European Research Fellow. He has served on countless committees, as well as editorial and advisory boards in the United States (especially those based at Princeton and Stanford) and abroad (including Belgium, England, Germany, Kazakhstan, Netherlands, Russia, and Uzbekistan).

It's difficult to assess what inspired a small-town Indiana boy (Devin hails from Speedway) to devote his professional life to a world so far removed from his own: to roam the Turkmen desert and the Kazakh steppe in search of local saints' tombs in the hope that the shrine caretakers would open their secret vaults for him (many of them did); to mine neglected archives in India, Tajikistan, and Russia, recovering lost hagiographies, chronicles, and genealogical tables; to spend a year in the early 1980s as a research fellow in Soviet Uzbekistan, forming connections that would last a lifetime; or to work on a daily basis with obscure texts in five, six, seven, or even eight languages. Perhaps some clues are offered in reading Devin's M.A.

thesis (1979), where the 23-year-old produced an extensive (311 pages) study of medieval Christian and Muslim perceptions and idealization of the wild. Devin studied the spiritual value that medieval Europeans and Muslims of the Near East ascribed to their ominous neighbors to the east and the north, be they Turks, Tatars, Mongols, nomads, or "mythical" peoples. And although the understanding of wilderness as a religious ideal and as an alternative to the present world, and the presumed affinity between holy man and "barbarian" would remain with Devin as analytical tools, his inquiries moved in different directions.

Devin's fascination with a "foreign, chaotic world" (in Mircea Eliade's words) and the portrayal of the Other evolved into a desire to study those who had been portrayed, *not* the portrayers. The arrival of the late Professor Yuri Bregel, the foremost Central Asian historian of his generation, at IU in 1981 offered Devin a unique opportunity to study these wilderness peoples on their own terms and in their own languages. A new world, shaped by an incredible wealth of unstudied textual sources, was uncovered. Devin's two-volume dissertation, on a 15-century Sufi commentary in Khorezmian Turkic on an important Arabic Islamic text, reveals Devin's erudition, originality, linguistic finesse, and ability to unearth unexplored tomes and connect them to broader questions.

Devin's first published monograph, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde* (1994), became an instant classic. In this "epic book," as one noted critic called it, Devin not only charted territories—textual, religious, geographic, linguistic—heretofore unknown to scholars of Islam, but also shed light on the significance of religious conversion (or stories thereof) for peoples and communities in Central and Inner Asia. It addressed themes of cohesion and competition, practice and symbolism, and even state and ethnic formation. Devin continued to explore these and other themes in the religious life of Muslims in Central Asia in many, many other studies and publications. Devin's extraordinary erudition and unwavering attention to detail have always demanded the reader's



full attention, nothing less. Another eminent critic of Devin's first monograph opens his review in the *Journal of Islamic Studies* (1999) thus: "This is an exceptionally intelligent and sophisticated book but it is not one for sissies." Indeed, his publications, and, as his students can attest, his lectures, too, are rich, challenging, and uncompromising (but still filled with humor and wit).

Devin has worked with numerous graduate students—mostly at IU, of course, but also nationally and internationally, serving on dissertation committees at different universities (Chicago, Michigan, Amsterdam)—many of whom now occupy academic positions all over the world. They all consider Devin to be a landmark in their intellectual genealogy. "Landmark" is used here in play with its original (*landmearc*), mid-16th-century meaning, as one who, by virtue of his conspicuousness "serves as a guide in the direction of one's course." Indeed, many a student's academic trajectory or mode of thinking has been transformed following Devin's guidance, whether in class or in reading his published work. But despite his students' admiration, and the official recognition by many prestigious bodies, Devin has remained modest and unpretentious, and still finds it difficult to accept praise. One hopes he doesn't blush too long at reading these lines.

Ron Sela