Acknowledgments

Looking back, it seems almost inevitable that I would write a book on Aden, to many an—undeservedly—obscure colonial outpost in Southern Arabia. But it was hardly a direct path. Nearly thirty years ago I was returning from my first extended period living and working in the Middle East when I passed through London in the hope of looking at various graduate programs. I had occasion to meet Professor Michael Twaddle at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies. Having an interest in both Islam and the British Empire, but not wishing to work in the “traditional” Middle East I asked him how these two may be combined. Among other things, he noted the dearth of scholarship on Aden and that something quite interesting might be done there. Given that this was 1989 and Aden was still the capital of the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), I didn’t give his suggestion much thought. I went on to do my Ph.D. research on Sufism in Somalia. Fast forward to 2001 and a chance encounter with a librarian from the University of Washington at a meeting of the Middle East Studies Association. He was an Adeni Somali who regaled me with fascinating stories of Aden’s patron saint, Sayyid Abu Bakr Aydarus. I was intrigued, but, again, I was working on other projects and filed this encounter away as interesting, but not really part of my research agenda. Finally, two years later, I was in London for a month, ostensibly to study a Sufi text with a Somali scholar resident in Britain. As luck would have it, he could find little time for me and so I was left at a loose end with four weeks to kill. Largely out of boredom, I went to the India Office Library looking for references to Somali religious scholars. What I found were the Aden residency records and their unbelievably textured accounts of daily life in the Settlement that form much of this book’s core. I finally took the hint.

Even so, this is a book with an inordinately long gestation period. After finally deciding that the fates wanted me to write a book on the Muslim community in Aden it is a project that has been beset by delays. While conducting the preliminary research for Imperial Muslims, I was also completing my first book Renewers of the Age. A near fatal bout of endocarditis (a bacterial infection of the aortic valve) and, later, open heart surgery delayed the project even further. Instability in Yemen made trips to the region at first difficult and then impossible. In other words, there are many reasons why this book should have never seen the light of day. I can only aver that its ultimate publication is due to the fact that Sharif Aydarus and the other awliya’ of Aden wished it to be so. I can only hope that they will not be displeased.

Saintly assistance aside, a project of this length naturally accrues many debts—professional, personal and institutional. I am enormously grateful to those institutions who have funded my work in various ways. These include my home institution,
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