



DENIS WRIGHT

The English  
Amongst the Persians

*During  
the Qajar Period  
1787-1921*



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Early British envoys to the Qajar Court (supposedly Ouseley, Jones and Malcolm) from a contemporary copy of a large wall fresco once in the Negarestan Palace, Tehran. By courtesy of the India Office Library and Records.

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To  
*my Iranian friends  
with the sincere wish that  
the progress and prosperity  
which have marked  
the first half century  
of Pahlavi rule  
will long continue*

anglophils' who have incurred much odium in their own country but who, because of their touching faith in Britain, deserve an honourable mention, embarrassing though they often were to the cause of Anglo-Persian relations. One such was Bahram, Christopher Sykes' hero in his *Four Studies in Loyalty*.

There was another class of British protégés, created by Anglo-Russian rivalry and both countries' efforts, when they considered their interests threatened, to make sure that provincial governorships were in friendly hands. To this end the British, like the Russians, did not hesitate to bring pressure on the Persian authorities, though such interference in internal affairs was greatly resented. In 1899 Durand was able to report to the Foreign Office that 'in the south we have greatly strengthened our position by insisting upon, and obtaining, the removal of an obnoxious Governor of Bushire' (21). In 1903 the British Minister protested against the threatened removal from office of the Governor of Sistan in whose support the Government of India were even prepared to occupy Nusratabad (now Zabol). As a result of a secret agreement made with the Bakhtiari khans before World War I the British Government undertook to help secure the appointment of Bakhtiari candidates to certain governorships. In Persian eyes such governors were little more than British puppets.

From time to time the oppressed and persecuted religious minorities—Zoroastrians, Jews, Nestorians, Armenians and Bahais—would seek the protection of the British Legation or Consulates. Sometimes the British, who in those days were inclined to regard themselves as the keepers of the world's conscience, would take up the cudgels, embarrassing though it was to intervene on behalf of Persian subjects.

The Zoroastrians, or *guebres* as the Persians called them, were concentrated in and around the desert towns of Kerman and Yazd but some were also settled in Tehran where they provided the Legation's gardeners. Their co-religionists, the Parsees of India, were much exercised by the harsh conditions under which their Persian kinsmen were forced to live and in 1854, with funds raised by the rich Parsee community in Bombay, sent an agent to reside in Persia and do what he could to ameliorate their lot. From then on the Persian Zoroastrian Amelioration Society of Bombay was able to maintain a permanent representative in Persia who, being a British subject, enjoyed the full support of the British Legation. When Nasir ed-Din Shah paid his first State Visit to London in 1873 the British Government arranged for him to receive a four-man delegation of Bombay Parsees who urged him to improve the position of the *guebres*. The support of the British Legation in Tehran was largely responsible for the abolition in 1882 of a dis-

criminatory poll tax on them. In 1908 the British Minister reminded the Persian authorities that his Government took 'a very warm interest in the welfare of the Zoroastrians' (22) and called for the punishment of those implicated in the murder of a prominent member of their community. At that time the agent of the Bombay Parsees was a Mr Ardeshir Reporter, who had been sent to Tehran from Bombay in 1893 at the age of twenty-seven and died there in 1933. He, too, kept in close touch with the British Legation and counted many influential Persians among his friends, by whom he was known as Ardeshirchi.

It was less easy for the British to assist the Jews but they did what they could. In 1850 a Jewish traveller from Germany found that the position of the seventy-odd Jewish families in Bushire was less oppressive than elsewhere in Persia due to the presence there of a British representative. The interest and activities of the London Society for the Promotion of Christianity among the Jews also provided Persian Jews with some moral support. In London the leader of British Jewry, Sir Moses Montefiore, armed with a Legation report on the Jews in Urumiyah, also spelt Urmia (now Rezaieh), in western Azarbaijan, persuaded the Foreign Office to instruct the British Minister to protest to the Persian Government about their situation. On the occasion of the Shah's visit to London in 1873 the Foreign Office arranged for him to receive Sir Moses and a deputation from the Jewish Board of Deputies, to whom he promised better treatment for Persian Jews. In 1896, on instructions from the Foreign Office, the British Minister intervened successfully on behalf of some three hundred Jews, living in Fars, who were threatened with forcible conversion to Islam. A few years previously the British Minister, alone among the foreign envoys, had protested to the Shah about the massacre of over twenty Jews in the Caspian town of Barfurush (now Babol). Such interventions were never welcomed and in 1905 when the British Consul at Shiraz sent his *sowars* to protect Jewish women and children from anti-Jewish rioters the Persian Government lodged an official complaint against him.

A little known facet of Anglo-Persian history is the protection at one time afforded by the British, at Persian request, to the large Christian Armenian population of Azarbaijan. This happened shortly after the signature of the Treaty of Turkmanchai in 1828 when the Armenians showed signs of emigrating to Russia. The British Minister, having pointed out to the Crown Prince what a loss this industrious people would be for the country, was asked to use his good offices in persuading them to remain in Persia. This he successfully did and, as a result, the Crown Prince issued a *farman* placing the Armenians under Macdonald's protection. On Macdonald's death this responsibility passed first to

no religious instruction given to Armenian children under the age of twenty-one.\* Eventually, in 1921, the C.M.S. made its peace with the Armenian Bishop of Julfa by assuring him that they would accept no further Armenians into the Anglican Church.

As far back as 1835 the British Minister had warned the first American missionaries to come to Persia of 'the indispensable necessity of avoiding interference with the religious belief of the Muhammedan population' (9). Yet that was what, by the very nature of their calling, missionaries most wanted to do. Most of them, like Henry Martyn in 1811, found it difficult to resist the temptation. Because of this the C.M.S. missionaries often proved an unsettling element among the conservative Moslem populations where they worked. The dispensaries they opened were regarded with distrust by the Persian authorities, who frequently insisted on their closure. The opening of a bookshop and the use of Armenian colporteurs to distribute religious literature printed on the C.M.S.'s own small press at Isfahan inevitably aroused suspicion. The missionaries sometimes seemed—for the best of motives—to invite trouble as, for instance, when they gave asylum to persecuted Bahais whose lives were in danger. The British Legation found their activities an embarrassment—'The Church Missionary Society here', wrote one of the diplomats in 1897, 'are a dreadful thorn in our side and are always giving rise to rows owing to their tactlessness and desire to proselytise amongst Moslems' (10). Yet one cannot but admire the obstinate courage and single-minded determination of women like Mary Bird who, shortly after joining the Mission in 1891, opened a dispensary for Moslem women deep in the Isfahan bazaar where Christians rarely penetrated. She had no medical training yet, once the ice was broken, women flocked to her for treatment. The *mullabs* preached against her in the mosques and encouraged their followers to insult her as she rode unveiled through the bazaar's crowded alleyways: they tried to shut and bolt her doors: with the help of her patients she reopened them. Despite all opposition Maryan Khanum, as she was known, persisted in her good works and won the devotion of her many patients. She died in Kerman in 1914.

Medical missionary work was, in the words of one of their number 'the golden key that opens the door of the heart of the most fanatical Moslem' (11). And indeed Persians of all classes crowded the C.M.S. hospitals and dispensaries, knowing that there was nowhere else where

\* This ban was relaxed later. By the early 1920s the C.M.S.'s Stuart Memorial College for Boys and Stileman Memorial School for Girls were, with the American Presbyterian Mission's Alborz College in Tehran, the three outstanding schools in the country.

they could get such excellent medical care. They were grateful to the missionaries for this but gratitude rarely led to a change of religion. The number of genuine converts to Christianity which resulted from so much effort and prayer was infinitesimal. Nonetheless, more as an act of faith in the future than in response to any need, the Anglican authorities in England decided in 1913 to constitute Persia a full diocese of the Church of England. The Rev. C. H. Stileman, Secretary to the C.M.S. in London, was consecrated the first Bishop of Isfahan—an appointment which must have seemed an extraordinary act of presumption to those Persians who were aware of it.

The only other British missionary activity in Persia during the Qajar period was that of The Archbishop of Canterbury's Assyrian Mission. Its purpose and methods were very different from those of the C.M.S.

The Anglican Church had first made contact with the Christian Assyrians of eastern Turkey and north-western Persia in 1843 when the Rev. G. P. Badger was sent on an exploratory journey among them by the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge. Following this the Assyrian Patriarch, known as Mar Shimun, and some of his bishops made periodic appeals for British support, addressing themselves sometimes to the Archbishop of Canterbury, sometimes to the consul in Tabriz. They sought British assistance partly in order to help resist the proselytising activities of American Presbyterians and French Catholic missionaries: partly in order to secure British political protection against the Turks, Persians and Kurds amongst whom they lived and suffered. The Archbishop of Canterbury eventually agreed to establish at Urumiyah a small educational mission designed to revitalise a fossilised church by educating the young and training men for the priesthood.

The first two Anglican priests reached Urumiyah in 1885: by 1890 there were four of them under Canon A. J. Maclean, all celibates and graduates of Oxford or Cambridge, prepared to live simply and frugally as the Assyrians lived. They quickly established four schools for boys, mostly boarders, two in Urumiyah itself and two outside on the plain. One of the schools, to which the others were in a way subsidiary, was exclusively for ordinands for the priesthood through whom the missionaries hoped to breathe new life into the Church. Any imitation of western ways and manners was forbidden, as was proselytising in the Anglican cause either among the Assyrians or Moslems. A hand-printing press enabled the mission to supply pupils with text books, portions of the scriptures, a catechism and, most important of all in many ways, a uniform church service book compiled by Maclean from the diverse manuscript service books then in use. The missionaries also produced a Persian-Assyrian grammar for the use of those who knew no Persian.

They found it difficult to believe that so young a man should have been adventuring and risking his life on his own account. Yet this is what he did, simply because he enjoyed it.

Though Layard was no agent of the British Government there were others who were. Their purpose was not to intrigue against the Shah's Government but to collect information for those charged with the defence of India. This intelligence-gathering activity falls broadly into two periods. Firstly between 1809 and 1838 when, as mentioned earlier, officers attached to the various military missions travelled widely in quest of information; secondly, from the early 'sixties onwards, when plans for the telegraph to India and alarm over the steady Russian advance in Central Asia caused the authorities in India to send officers to collect topographical information, explore routes and recruit agents to spy on the Russians. This was all part of the Great Game in which Persia was a pawn.

This second group of officers, often trained engineers attached to the Indo-European Telegraph Department or the different boundary commissions, travelled far and wide, usually accompanied by Indian surveyors. Others, when taking leave from India, were encouraged to travel through Persia, particularly along the northern frontier. They recorded in their notebooks such details as the location of wells, the availability of fodder, and the suitability of routes for the transport of guns. Under cover as Assistant Commissioner on the Perso-Afghan Boundary Commission an officer was employed on 'special service' on the Khorasan frontier, where he was expected to report every move of the Russians—a lonely life which drove one man almost to despair.\*

Little attempt was made to hide the activities of these men from the Persians, who often provided military escorts for them when travelling in the remoter areas. The Assistant Commissioner on the Khorasan frontier joined the Shah when he toured the frontier. A number of them wrote articles for the Journal of the Royal Geographical Society or books about their travels for all to read. They also wrote long and very detailed secret reports for the Intelligence Branch in India. These, together with information from consuls and other sources, formed the basis of the Survey of India's maps of Persia. They also provided the raw material for massive tomes, known as Gazetteers. Marked 'Secret' or 'For official use only', these Gazetteers were a remarkable series which embraced

much of India and her borderlands.\* Designed originally to provide detailed factual information that would be useful to military commanders, their scope was extended by Lord Curzon who, when Viceroy, called for a *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf* that would also be useful to political officers in the area.

There was at this time one British traveller more interested in the Persians as people than in their country's topography and monuments. He was Edward Granville Browne—the future Professor E. G. Browne of Cambridge—who in due course won the esteem and affection of the Persians as no other Englishman had ever done.

Browne's interest in the East had first been stirred by the 1877–8 war between Turkey and Russia when he was still a schoolboy at Eton. His ambition was to help the Turks by becoming an officer in their army and he started learning Turkish for this purpose. But the war came to an end, so instead of joining the army he went to Cambridge to read medicine. However by now his interest in oriental languages was such that he decided to study them as well—Arabic, Persian and Hindustani in addition to Turkish. He gave early evidence of his genius by securing First Class Honours in the oriental language Tripos and shortly afterwards qualified as a doctor. While working at St Bartholomew's Hospital in 1887 Browne was overjoyed to be offered a Fellowship by his old college, Pembroke. He therefore abandoned medicine in favour of oriental languages and decided to spend a year in Persia—the home of Sufi mysticism in which he had become deeply interested—before taking up the Fellowship which was to keep him in Cambridge for the rest of his life.

Browne was twenty-six when he reached Persia in November 1887, having travelled out from England by the Black Sea route to Trebizond and Tabriz. He moved on to Tehran and then to Isfahan and Shiraz before spending his last few months in Yazd and Kerman. He travelled light, with only one servant, and was always ready to fall in with such company as he met on the way. Already equipped with a rare knowledge of Persian he lost no opportunity as he travelled of probing the inner thoughts of those whom he met. The book he wrote on his return to England, *A Year Amongst the Persians*, is unlike any other travel book about Persia for the insight it gives into Persian thinking. Browne does this by vivid accounts of metaphysical and theological conversations

\* Major Charles Stewart who, when applying for leave in 1884, wrote that he dreaded 'passing another year of utter loneliness without speaking to a civilised being'. He later served as Consul at Rasht, Mashad and Tabriz, and wrote *Through Persia in Disguise*.

\* The *Gazetteer of Persia* was first published about 1870: revised editions were issued from time to time. The *Gazetteer of Kermanshab* (1907) was compiled by H. L. Rabino. J. G. Lorimer's masterpiece, *The Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia* (1908 and 1915) ran to nearly 5,000 pages, a mine of historical and geographical information.

with a wide variety of Persians—Moslems, Zoroastrians and Babis—all classes. Dennison Ross, himself a great orientalist, described *A Year Amongst the Persians* as 'one of the world's most fascinating and instructive books of travel. . . . It is, however, more than a mere record of travel and goes beyond the ordinary limits of such works, for apart from its lively and entrancing descriptions of Persia and its people, it is an infallible guide to modern Persian literature and thought, and as such should always find its place on the student's bookshelf beside the author's monumental *Literary History of Persia*' (23).

Browne returned to Cambridge in October 1888. He never went back to Persia, but his year there had filled him with an undying love for the country and its people—'he so loved his Persians', Ross wrote, 'that he forgave everything, and only stayed to praise and admire' (24). To those who criticised the Persians for their many alleged vices Browne replied 'these vices are undeniably common amongst the creatures of the Court, with whom Europeans having official positions in Persia come most in contact, but few who have mixed on intimate terms with all classes of the people, and especially the middle class, will assert that these vices are general, or will deny that where they exist they are largely the outcome of the intolerable system of government' (25).

Persian admiration for Browne was slower in coming, but when it came it was unbounded. At first they disliked—as they still do—his sympathetic interest in the persecuted Babi sect about which he had much to say both in *A Year Amongst the Persians* and in various later publications. Persian awareness that in Browne they had a staunch champion dates from his defence of the Constitutionalists' revolt against Muzaffar ed-Din Shah in 1906. From then onwards Browne, despite his heavy academic work, was tireless both as a lecturer and writer of pamphlets and newspaper articles in defence of the reform movement in Persia. He deplored the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 dividing Persia into spheres of influence and bitterly denounced Russian activities in Tehran and Tabriz: he also played a leading part in forming the London Persia Committee\* which included influential members of both Houses of Parliament and aimed to promote better Anglo-Persian understanding. Browne's book *The Persian Revolution of 1905-1909*, published in 1910, was an outspoken attempt to explain Persia's problems, caught as she was in Big Power rivalry. Here at last was an Englishman who saw things as Persians saw them. The Persians took Browne to their hearts, less perhaps as a scholar (though he was the

greatest Persian scholar of his time) than as a political friend. When he was sixty a touching illuminated address was sent to him by his Persian admirers, among them three former prime ministers, who expressed their 'gratitude for the labours which you have undertaken for us and for our country, whereby you have made the Persian nation your eternal debtor' (26). In 1966, on the fortieth anniversary of his death, he was still remembered by old friends and admirers who organised a service in Tehran in his memory.

A year after Browne's departure from Persia George Curzon, then a thirty-year-old Member of Parliament for Southport, arrived there. Every inch an aristocrat, he had the finely chiselled features of a Roman patrician and the haughty bearing associated with his class. He had taken the unusual route of crossing the Caspian by ship from Baku to Uzun Ada on the eastern shore: from there he travelled 300 miles on the newly-opened Transcaspian railway to Ashkhabad in Turkoman country before making his way across the border to Kuchan in northern Khorasan. Then, after being denied permission to enter the great natural border fortress of Kalat-e-Naderi, he made for Mashad.

Although commissioned by *The Times* to write a series of twelve articles at £2.10.0. a piece on Persia, Curzon's main purpose was to collect material for a book of his own. To this end, though he rarely left the beaten track, he spent nearly six months travelling from Mashad to Tehran and then south to Bushire by way of Kashan, Isfahan and Shiraz. He then steamed up the Karun from Mohammerah to Shustar before returning home to write *Persia and the Persian Question*. Curzon devoted nearly two years of concentrated effort to this remarkable, detailed study of Qajar Persia.

Curzon's interest in the East had been awakened by a chance lecture he had attended while still a schoolboy at Eton. After leaving Oxford he embarked on a succession of journeys which took him to Egypt, Turkey, India and Russia (including the newly-conquered khanates of Central Asia) as well as the Far East and North America. Long before he reached Persia in September 1889 he ardently believed in the civilising virtues of the British Empire: by the time he left he was convinced that 'the preservation, so far as is still possible, of the integrity of Persia must be registered as a cardinal precept of our Imperial creed' (27). This conviction was to remain with him all his life: so too his belief that Russian ambitions in Persia were a threat to the British position in India, the Empire's most precious possession.

In contrast to the splendour associated with his name, Curzon travelled alone and without a servant. Where he could he used the *chapar* service, riding in all weathers up to sixty miles a day from one

\* H. F. B. Lynch (1862-1913), a strong supporter of Persian causes, was a co-founder. Son of T. K. Lynch, the founder of Lynch Bros.: M.P. (L) for Ripon 1906-10: author of *Armenia: Travels and Studies*.