

JOURNAL OF THE IRAN SOCIETY



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OBJECTS

The objects for which the Society is established are to promote learning and advance education in the subject of Iran, its peoples and culture (but so that in no event should the Society take a position on, or take any part in, contemporary politics) and particularly to advance education through the study of the language, literature, art, history, religions, antiquities, usages, institutions and customs of Iran.

ACTIVITIES

In fulfilment of these objects, the Society, which is registered in Great Britain as a charity, shall, among other things:

Hold meetings and establish, promote, organise, finance and encourage the study, writing, production and distribution of books, periodicals, monographs and publications,

Do all such other lawful and charitable things as shall further the attainment of the objects of the Society or any of them.

The full text of the Rules of the Society may be inspected in the Society's offices.

Those wishing to apply for membership can do so through the Society's website, or by writing to the Hon. Secretary for an application form. Students are encouraged to join.

JOURNAL

The aim of the Journal is to reproduce edited versions of some of the lectures given over the year, to review books of interest to members and to publish short articles of general interest. The editor welcomes contributions and suggestions. The journal is financed by a benefaction from the Kathleen Palmer-Smith Publication Fund.

CHAIRMAN'S FOREWORD

This year sees the centenary of the foundation of The Persia Society in 1911. Sir Denis Wright's history of the Society on the website gives the details. It is worth repeating that the suggestion for the society's foundation came from the Persian Minister to London at the time, who felt that many of the Englishmen going to work in Iran as diplomats, bankers, oil men or soldiers, as well as the policy makers in London with whom he had to deal, were woefully ignorant of his country, its history and culture, which led to unnecessary misunderstandings and conflicts in their intercourse with their local counterparts. He proposed that a society be established to rectify this situation. It is in that same spirit that our lectures aim to show how Iran, from the beginnings of its history, has come to be what it is today. As a reminder of this ideal, Robert Irwin, the speaker at the centenary dinner to be held on 29th November, will be talking to us in a light hearted way about the early British scholars who established Persian studies in this country.

This year has seen the publication of a number of English translations of contemporary Persian prose works. Regrettably, these have appeared too late for reviews to be included in this volume, but those interested can look at the websites of Haus Publishing and Candle & Fog Publishing to see details of their translations of Mahmoud Dowlatabadi and Masoud Behnoud, two writers with a large following in Iran. Members will also be interested by Alan Ashmole's *Sand, Oil & Dollars: The Adventures of an Expatriate British Bank Manager in the Middle East in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s*. Alan was Hon. Secretary of the Society for many years. His personal and often amusing anecdotes of banking in Basra, Kuwait and Muscat are a reminder of what life in the Persian Gulf used to be like before the oil boom.

I would like to acknowledge the debt that we owe to David Blow for tirelessly putting this journal together and to Janet Rady who, in between running her new gallery of Persian art, puts a great deal of time and effort into putting together the programme of events, which is no easy task.

Antony Wynn

Curzon and the Persian Question.

Lecture given by David Blow on 21st October, 2010.



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All Curzon's principal beliefs, the ones that guided his actions in office, were formed while he was a schoolboy at Eton from 1872 to 1878. The first of these was his belief in the civilizing mission of the British Empire. The second was that no part of the Empire was more important than India. The third was his belief that the expansion of Tsarist Russia into Asia was a threat to India and therefore to the Empire as a whole, and that Britain must be

active in combating that threat. This is where Persia came in, because it had long been regarded by British policy-makers as a vital buffer state which kept Russia at a safe distance from India.

Evidence of Curzon's early concern with the Russian threat comes from the minutes of an Eton debating society, which record a speech he gave on the motion, 'Are we justified in regarding with equanimity the advance of Russia towards our Indian frontier?' The young Curzon was in no doubt that we were not. The policy of Russia, he said, was "a most ambitious and aggressive one" – and he went on to give a sophisticated analysis of the danger that might arise. It was not that Russia was likely to invade India. However, if a great question of diplomacy arose in Europe in which the interests of England were opposed to those of Russia, it might then suit Russia to send out an army to watch our Indian frontier. "In such a case as this", warned Curzon, "England's right hand would obviously be tied back."

From Eton, Curzon went to Balliol College, Oxford, where he studied Classics (Mods and Greats) and gave plenty of evidence of his intellectual brilliance, his limitless capacity for hard work and his burning determination to succeed. On coming down, he served briefly as assistant private secretary to the Conservative Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, and in June 1886 was elected as Conservative Member of Parliament for Southport in Lancashire, a seat he held until his appointment as Viceroy of India twelve years later. By this time he had already travelled extensively in Europe, and his parliamentary commitments were not such as to curtail his wanderlust. In 1887 he embarked on a world tour, in the course of which he saw India for the first time and was thrilled to discover that Government House in Calcutta was modelled on his own family's Palladian mansion of Kedleston in Derbyshire. The following year he was in Central Asia, where he found his early concern over a Russian threat to India not only borne out but strongly reinforced. The cause of his increased concern was the Transcaspian Railway which the Russians had just built from the Caspian Sea to Samarqand to secure the conquests they had made over the past two decades, capturing Tashkent, Samarqand, Khiva and Merv – the last as recently as 1884. Curzon travelled its entire length of 900 miles from its western terminal on the Caspian Sea to Samarqand in the heart of Central Asia. He rather liked the Russians he met, praising their frank and amiable manners and their extreme civility, and he conceded that Russian occupation had brought advantages – not the least of which was an end to the brutal slave trade centred on Khiva and Bukhara. But he was convinced that the Transcaspian Railway had put Russia in a position of overwhelming strength on the borders of India's two vital buffer states – Afghanistan and Persia.

He gave a forceful analysis of the situation in the first of a series of books he planned to write on the threats to British interests in Asia. Entitled 'Russia in Central Asia', it contained many of the arguments Curzon was to put forward time and again in favour of a more assertive policy in Persia.

Curzon reckoned that the Transcaspian Railway would enable Russia to place 100,000 men on the northwest and northern frontiers of Afghanistan. He warned that with her complete control of Transcaspia secured by the railway and with the road open to Herat, Russia had planted her foot on the path which every Indian conqueror had trod from Alexander to Nadir Shah. But he said that an invasion of India would present Russia with formidable supply problems and that she would first need to make herself master of the fertile north-eastern Persian province of Khurasan. The Transcaspian Railway, which ran parallel to the Persian frontier and at one point came very close to it, had virtually achieved this. "The Russian minister at Teheran", wrote Curzon, "has but to wink his eye in the direction of the Caspian and Khurasan for the Shah to know exactly what is meant. The Transcaspian railway is a sword of Damocles perpetually suspended above his head."

Curzon reiterated the argument he had put forward at the Eton debating society – namely that Russia's ultimate goal lay not in India but in Europe. It was not Calcutta, but Constantinople; not the Ganges, but the Golden Horn. To achieve this, Russia was ready to invade India, though not with the object of conquering it – something he believed Russia would be unable to do anyway. The object was to keep Britain pinned down in India so that it could no longer oppose Russian aspirations to send her warships from the Black Sea into the Aegean by taking control of the Straits. In other words, the Persian Question was part of the larger Eastern Question, which had to do with the hopes and fears of all the Great Powers in the face of the decay of the Ottoman Empire.

Curzon lamented that through what he called "deplorable neglect" Britain had forfeited to Russia the ascendancy it had enjoyed in Persia in the early years of the nineteenth century, when it had seen off the threat by Napoleon to attack India through Persia. Since then Russia had taken from Persia in two wars all her territory in the southern Caucasus, had turned the Caspian Sea into a Russian lake, and with the construction of the Transcaspian Railway had obtained "a complete military and strategical ascendancy along the entire northern frontier of Persia". Russian domination of northern Persia, Curzon warned, had serious commercial and strategic consequences. A valuable market for British and Indian goods was being lost to Russia. At the same time, the absorption of north-east Persia and Khurasan would enable Russia to advance upon Herat or even upon India itself, by striking through the

Persian province of Seistan which lay immediately to the south of Khurasan and bordered Indian Baluchistan. As if this were not a sufficient danger there was, in Curzon's words, a greater mischief still. The Russian minister in Tehran, Prince Dolgorouki, was demanding a number of concessions of the Shah – among them a monopoly of railway construction in Persia. By this means, claimed Curzon, Russia would achieve its long cherished ambition of establishing a naval base on the Persian Gulf. Are we content, he asked, to see a naval station within a few days' sail of Karachi, and to contemplate a hostile squadron battering Bombay?

Curzon ruled out any likelihood that the Shah's government would resist Russian demands, pointing out that the only effective military force it possessed was the Persian Cossack Brigade composed of Persian troopers under Russian officers. He argued that the only way to keep the Russians out of southern Persia was for Britain to be the first to build the railways into the region as an extension of the Indian railway system, and he saw no reason why the Shah should refuse his consent. In the event, any such move was blocked by a moratorium on railway construction agreed between Russia and Persia in 1890 which remained in force for twenty years.

'Russia in Central Asia', appeared in 1889, the same year in which Curzon set out on what was to be his only visit to Persia. He claimed that before doing so he read or referred to nearly every book and learned article which had been written in European languages on Persia during the last five centuries – a total of between 200 and 300 works. It was typical of the thoroughness with which he approached every task. And as his financial means at this juncture were modest, to help meet the costs of the journey he arranged to send back a series of articles for *The Times*.

Over a period of four months from the end of September 1889, Curzon rode right across Persia from the far north-east to the far south-west – a distance of nearly 2,000 miles. He rode on a succession of what he described as "mediocre and sometimes abominable steeds" which he hired and exchanged at the government post-houses along the main routes. He slept in the post-houses, which provided very basic accommodation and he was accompanied by a post-boy on each stage. He carried his own provisions and singled out for particular praise Crosse and Blackwell's tinned soups which he pronounced to be "quite excellent" and "almost a meal in themselves." He described the roads as "no more than a foot-track beaten by the hoofs of horses, donkeys, and mules.... commonly strewn with stones and boulders", and in the mountain passes as "little more than furrows or ruts". The journey would have been a formidable undertaking for anyone, but it was even more so for Curzon who suffered from a curvature of the spine, which caused him

frequent pain and for which he had to wear a steel brace.

Harold Nicolson observes that as Curzon travelled through Persia, his romantic sensibilities could not remain untouched “by those plains of amber, those peaks of amethyst, the dignity of that crumbled magnificence, that silence of two thousand years.” But the impact Persia made on Curzon went deeper than that. For all that he found to criticize – and there was much – Persia became in Curzon’s mind, if not as important as India, then very nearly so. One might almost say that he fell in love with the country. Curzon was strongly attracted by the immemorial East and part of the appeal of Persia was that he found it to be, as he wrote, “of the East most Eastern; though the Persian nobleman may ride in a Russian brougham, the Persian merchant carry a French watch, and the Persian peasant wear a Manchester blouse, yet the heart of the nation is unregenerate, and is fanatically (and not always unfortunately) attached to the ancient order of things.”

Curzon again travelled on the Russian Transcaspiian Railway before entering Persia across its north-eastern frontier in Khurasan, where he was now able to see the extent to which the province had fallen under Russian influence. He noted that Russian goods filled the bazaars – evidence of what he described as a cardinal axiom of Russian politics in the East, which was that commercial must precede political control. He also noted that Russia had just appointed a diplomat with a good grasp of Persian politics as its first Consul-General in the provincial capital, Mashhad, and had provided him with an imposing and spacious residence. He commented on the implication of this in the dramatic and highly coloured style he tended to adopt when speaking of the Russian threat. “A vigorous Russian representative at Meshed is a visible symbol of the great Power whose movements and intentions form the subject of conversation in every Oriental bazaar, and whose ever-swelling shadow, witnessed with a sort of paralysed acquiescence by the native peoples, looms like a thunder-cloud over the land.” However he drew some comfort from the fact that Britain had responded quickly by appointing a Consul-General of its own, housing him in an equally imposing residence. He was also pleased to observe the favourable impression made on the Persians by the picturesque uniform and smart appearance of the two sergeants and three privates of the Indian Corps of Guides, who guarded the British Consul and rather outshone the four Cossacks of his Russian counterpart. This British response was a welcome sign for Curzon that the era of “masterly inactivity” towards Persia, which he so much deplored, was now over. The need for Britain to play an active role was underlined for Curzon by a dispiriting interview in Mashhad with the Persian governor-general of Khurasan, who was a brother of the Shah. “My interview with His Royal Highness left upon

me the same impression that did the conversation of so many of the Persian ministers whom I afterwards encountered – viz: the existence of an abstract willingness for the internal development of their country, but a total absence of initiative, and a passive acquiescence in the *status quo*.”

From Mashhad, Curzon followed the road west along the foothills of the Alburz Mountains to the capital, Tehran. The road was a relatively busy one and its human traffic aroused in Curzon intense interest and strongly conflicting emotions. “All classes and all ages,” he wrote, “were on the road; horsemen and footmen; rich men and poor men; seyids and scoundrels – a microcosm of the stately, commonplace, repulsive, fascinating Oriental world.” But it was the camel caravans he encountered at night that most stirred his imagination and brought out his great descriptive powers. “Out of the black darkness is heard the distant boom of a heavy bell. Mournfully, and with perfect regularity of iteration, it sounds, gradually swelling nearer and louder, and perhaps mingling with the tones of smaller bells, signalling the rearguard of the same caravan.....nearer and louder as the sound becomes, not another sound, and not a visible object, appear to accompany it. Suddenly, and without the slightest warning, there looms out of the darkness, like the apparition of a phantom ship, the form of the captain of the caravan. His spongy tread sounds softly on the smooth sand, and, like a great string of linked ghouls, the silent procession stalks by and is swallowed up in the night.”

In Tehran, Curzon found a city of some 200,000 inhabitants that was beginning, as he put it, “to clothe itself at a West End tailor’s”. For all that, Tehran was “being Europeanised”, in Curzon’s view, “upon Asiatic lines” and he liked the city the more for it. “While surrendering to an influence which the most stolid cannot resist,” he wrote, “it has not bartered away an originality of which the most modern world would not wish to deprive it.”

But Curzon was worried by the large number of European “speculators, small traders, would-be concessionaries, wandering *chevaliers d’industrie, et hoc genus omne* – all the goodly crew, in fact, who live to illustrate the phrase that ‘where the carcass is, there will the eagles [surely a mistranslation for vultures!] be gathered together.” He was particularly critical of what he considered to be the indiscriminate granting by the Shah of commercial concessions to foreigners, many of whom he argued were simply adventurers or, worse still, rogues, and were only interested in selling on the monopoly and making a fat profit: “I cannot, as a friend of Persia, too strongly reiterate my conviction that this headlong signing away of the country’s assets, in return for a cash payment, to all the knights-errants of speculation whose quest may lead them to Teheran, is a policy fraught neither with principle,

patriotism, nor ulterior profit.”

Curzon had an interview with Nasir ud-Din Shah, who had been on the throne for forty-one years and was now aged fifty-eight. The Qajar ruler had done his best to avoid falling too much under the sway of either Russia or Britain by playing them off against each other. But he was understandably more afraid of Russia and had tried in vain to obtain a British guarantee of Persia's territorial integrity. He had also taken a fitful interest in reforms, although this had now petered out. He was the first Persian monarch to visit Europe and had returned from his third European tour just as Curzon was arriving in Persia. He received Curzon standing alone in the throne-room of the palace. Although he spoke French when he was in Europe, he addressed him in Persian, through an interpreter. His curiosity was immediately aroused when he heard that Curzon had entered Persia on the newly built Russian road from Ashkabad, the capital of Transcaspia, to the frontier of Khurasan. He subjected him to a ten-minute cross-examination, “conducted in short, jerky sentences,.....about the position of the Russians, the road that they had made, and the unfinished works on the Persian side of the frontier”. Curzon thought Nasir ud-Din Shah an improvement on his Qajar predecessors, but he criticized what he saw as his capricious attitude to reforms, which led him to abandon them as soon as the novelty wore off, like the discarded bric-a-brac that filled the lumber rooms of his palace.

Curzon had several other interviews with prominent Persians before resuming his journey. Travelling south, he entered a region where British influence predominated and was delighted to find the bazaars full of British and Indian rather than Russian goods, although he seems to have been unaware of the damage which the import of cheap European manufactured goods was doing to the local craft industries. He also noted with approval that Lord Salisbury's government had recognized the importance of British commercial interests in Isfahan by appointing a British consul to the city and had chosen for the post a leading officer of the Indo-European Telegraph company, which since 1862 had maintained a telegraphic link between London and India. There were some fourteen stations of the company spread out across Iran and Curzon had the highest regard for the British engineers who maintained them. “Scattered throughout the country,” he wrote, “where they are brought into frequent connection with all classes of the people, from a governor passing along the highway to his official post to the peasants of the neighbouring villages; constantly riding to and fro along the lines; possessed sometimes of a little medical knowledge, and willing to dispense a modest charity; above all, absolutely superior to bribes, the English telegraph officers in Persia may be considered mainly responsible for the high estimate

in which English character and honour are held in that country.”

In the centre and south of the country he contemplated the remains of Persia's glorious past – the crumbling palaces of Isfahan, the ruins of Persepolis – which symbolized for him the decay into which Persia had fallen. The last stage of his overland journey, from Shiraz to Bushire on the Persian Gulf, was the most arduous of all as it involved crossing three steep mountain passes. There were no post-houses on this road, so he hired a pony for himself and mules for his baggage. After covering 160 miles he reached Bushire, where “the Union Jack streaming from the top of a gigantic mast, by far the loftiest object in Bushire,” he noted with obvious satisfaction, “proclaimed the site of the British Residency”. His journey was not yet over, however. Before returning home, he took a steamer up the Gulf to investigate the situation on the Karun River, Persia's only navigable river, which the energetic British Minister at Tehran, Sir Henry Drummond Wolff, had finally persuaded the Shah to open to international shipping – a move of potential benefit to British and Indian commerce in providing easier access to the interior. Curzon found that local Persian officials and traders were doing their best to prevent the concession being implemented, but was confident that this opposition would soon be overcome.

From what he saw in Persia, Curzon concluded that it had neither the ability nor the will to resist Russia, which he was convinced coveted the whole of the north of the country and yearned for an outlet on the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. It was weak and under-developed, but above all, it was mired in corruption. Yet he believed that the Persian people were “not yet wholly played out”, they had an irrepressible vitality and there were chances of redemption, but only so long as Britain was there to give a helping hand. Curzon argued that Britain's commercial and strategic interests depended on the preservation of the territorial integrity of Persia which, he said, “must be registered as a cardinal precept of our Imperial creed.” He also believed the impression to be gaining ground in Persia that British counsels were framed....with an honest desire for the country's gain....and that the English were “personally popular, except when they adopt the brow-beating tone, a line of conduct which is in the last degree abhorrent to a people who pride themselves on civility of deportment, and possess a natural dignity.” He looked forward confidently to the moment “when Persia shall look upon Great Britain as her most natural ally, and Great Britain upon Persia as her willing friend.”

Curzon returned to England exhausted at the end of February 1890 and had to take a holiday on the Mediterranean to recuperate before getting down to writing the comprehensive work on Persia which he felt was desperately

needed. To do this he sought seclusion in lodgings in the south London suburb of Norwood. By November 1891 he had virtually completed his work, when a complication arose. The Conservative Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, offered him the post of Under-Secretary of State for India, which he readily accepted. But Salisbury then insisted on examining his manuscript for anything that might damage Anglo-Persian relations and said changes would have to be made to the chapter on the Shah. To Curzon's objection that the things he said were true, Salisbury replied "That is precisely the circumstance that will make them intolerable to the Shah....." In the event, the changes required were relatively minor and *Persia and the Persian Question* was finally published in the spring of 1892, in two hefty volumes of more than 1300 pages. It was dedicated to "the officials, civil and military, in India whose hands uphold the noblest fabric yet reared by the genius of a conquering nation" and struck a typically Curzonian note of high drama in the introduction: "Turkestan, Afghanistan, Transcaspia, Persia – to many these names breathe only a sense of utter remoteness or a memory of strange vicissitudes and of moribund romance. To me, I confess, they are the pieces on a chessboard upon which is being played out a game for the dominion of the world."

The book was generally well received. Blackwood's Magazine hailed it as "the best and most complete book on any Asiatic state in our language, not even excepting our Indian Empire," and the novelist and poet, Thomas Hardy, wrote personally to Curzon expressing his admiration. Some reviewers, however, found Curzon too verbose, and one made a caustic comment that was not without an element of truth. "Mr Curzon," he wrote, "seems to be under the impression that he has discovered Persia, and that having discovered it, he now in some mysterious way owns it."

Curzon's initial period in government was short-lived. Lord Salisbury's Conservatives lost power to the Liberals under Gladstone in July 1892 and remained out of office for the next three years. During this time Curzon resumed his peripatetic exploration of the challenges facing the British Empire in Asia. A tour of the Far East resulted in another book, *Problems of the Far East*, and was followed by a challenging journey through the Pamirs to Afghanistan. In the course of this last journey he discovered what has since been regarded as a likely source of the Oxus River (the *Amu Darya*) and was awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Geographical Society. In April 1895, shortly after his return from Afghanistan he married an American heiress, Mary Leiter. It was a very happy marriage of deep mutual love and it also freed Curzon from any further financial anxiety. The Conservatives under Lord Salisbury returned to power in June of that year and Curzon was appointed

Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office and a Privy Councillor. Three years later, in 1898, Salisbury chose him to succeed Lord Elgin as Viceroy of India, an office Curzon had long set his heart on. In order that he should have an appropriate title, he was made a baron in the Irish peerage.

By the time Curzon went out to India, the situation in Persia had changed for the worse as far as Britain was concerned. Nasir ud-Din Shah had been assassinated in 1896 by a pan-Islamist and succeeded by his son, Muzaffar ud-Din, who turned out to be a weaker ruler than his father and more susceptible to Russian influence. Muzaffar ud-Din Shah also suffered from poor health which he sought to remedy by frequent trips to European spas. As he was accompanied each time by a large retinue, these trips exhausted what little money was left in the state treasury and forced the government to have recourse to foreign loans. Russia was only too eager to oblige and thereby to tighten its grip on Persia.

The maintenance of British supremacy in central and southern Persia and in the Persian Gulf was a major preoccupation of Curzon's throughout his six-and-a-half years as viceroy. He believed firmly that Britain must oppose any attempt by a foreign power – and particularly Russia – to challenge this supremacy, even if, in the last resort, it meant going to war. To begin with, Curzon had difficulty in persuading his ministerial colleagues in London to support such a firm stand. They were unwilling to risk fresh conflicts at a time when Britain had its hands full dealing with the Boer War in South Africa, the Boxer Rebellion in China, increasing friction with France in Africa and had few friends. Important though Persia and the Gulf were, they had to be weighed against other British interests elsewhere, which might be adversely affected by the assertive policy demanded by Curzon. And did Britain really have the military capacity, given the demands that were being made on it, to enforce such a policy? The Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, was not alone in thinking that Curzon was over-optimistic on this score. "He always wants me to negotiate with Russia as if I had 500,000 men at my back, and I have not," complained Salisbury on one occasion. There were also those who believed a Russian advance towards the Gulf to be inevitable and questioned whether Britain had a moral right to prevent Russia or any other European power from obtaining a port on the Gulf. Such defeatist views infuriated Curzon and he hit back saying, "I can no more admit that an irresistible destiny is going to plant Russia in the Persian Gulf than in Kabul or Constantinople. South of a certain line in Asia her future is much more what we choose to make it than what she can make it herself."

During his first summer in the Himalayan resort of Simla, the summer

capital of the Raj, Curzon penned a lengthy despatch on the Persian Question for the benefit of the government in London. Persia, he wrote, appeared closer to dissolution than ever before, while the encroachments of Russian power were being steadfastly pursued. He urged the British government to recognize that Persia was not just an Indian, but also an Imperial concern, as Britain had commercial, political and strategic interests there. He said Britain should assert her influence in Tehran as much as possible, but as she was unlikely to shake Russia's dominant position in the capital, she should concentrate on consolidating and protecting her sphere of influence in the centre and south of the country. He underlined the strategic importance of Seistan, which he warned Russia was trying to get its hands on, and noted that British influence in the Gulf was being increasingly challenged by other nations, among them France, which had an alliance with Russia. But he assumed that it would be accepted as a cardinal axiom of British policy that no European power, and especially not Russia, would be allowed to overrun Central and Southern Persia, and so to reach the Gulf, or to acquire naval facilities in the latter. He concluded by saying that an attempt should be made to reach an agreement with Russia delineating their respective spheres of interest in Persia. But if that failed, which he thought likely, then Britain should make it clear that any Russian encroachments in Northern Persia would provoke corresponding measures for the protection of British interests in the south.

The Home government delayed for nine months before replying to Curzon's despatch and rejecting both the approach to Russia and the assertion of British supremacy in southern Persia and the Gulf. In the meantime Russia tightened its grip on the Persian government with a massive new loan, Russian engineers explored possible railway lines to the Gulf, and Russian warships began to put in an appearance there for the first time. Curzon was disappointed with his old Oxford friend, Sir Arthur Hardinge, who had been appointed British Minister in Tehran and whom he thought too accommodating towards the Persian Government. "...I do not believe in wheedling the Persians or trying to twist them round one's finger," he wrote to the India Office. "A good show of the boot now and then is very essential." He worked hard to counter the growing Russian influence by promoting Anglo-Indian trade with Persia, advancing Indian government loans – albeit relatively small ones – strengthening ties with Arab rulers around the Gulf, increasing consular establishments and commissioning a flotilla of gunboats for permanent service in the Gulf. And in the end he got his way with London. In January 1902 a new Foreign Secretary, Lord Lansdowne, adopted the firm approach to Persia which Curzon had been recommending. In a despatch to Hardinge in Tehran, he said: "The Persian Gov should...distinctly understand.....that

Great Britain could not consent to the acquisition by Russia of a military or naval station in the Persian Gulf, for the reason that such a station must be regarded as a challenge to Great Britain and a menace to her Indian Empire. If the Persian Gov were at any time to make such a concession to Russia, it would be necessary for His Majesty's Government to take in the Persian Gulf such measures as they might consider necessary for the protection of British interests." This was followed by a statement along the same lines in parliament ten days later by the Under-Secretary for the Foreign Office, Lord Cranborne, and an even more strongly worded one by Lansdowne in May 1903. In response, the Russian Ambassador, Benckendorff, assured Lansdowne that Russia "had no idea of establishing a naval base in the Persian Gulf", but he was not responsive to Lansdowne's suggestion of opening discussions on spheres of interest. The truth was that military and diplomatic circles in Russia were confident that the whole of Persia would sooner or later fall into their sphere of interest. The British Government also agreed to Curzon's long-standing request to make a tour of the Gulf, which he embarked on in November 1903 "in swashbuckling style", as he himself put it, accompanied by a powerful naval flotilla. The tour enhanced British prestige and was accounted a great success, except for a dispute that blew up with the Persians over protocol when Curzon arrived in Bushire, as a result of which he refused to go ahead with the visit. Curzon attached an almost "oriental" importance to maintaining face.

In the summer of 1905 Curzon resigned as Viceroy over differences with the Commander-in-Chief in India, Lord Kitchener. He returned to England and suffered a further blow the following summer in the death of his beloved wife. His return to public life began in March 1907 when he was elected Chancellor of Oxford University and was completed in January 1908 when Lord Lansdowne persuaded the Irish peers to elect him as one of their representatives in the House of Lords. This gave him a platform to deliver a bitter attack on the Anglo-Russian Convention which had been signed in St. Petersburg some months earlier. The Convention was designed to end the rivalry between Britain and Russia in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Far East by establishing mutually agreed spheres of interest, something that Curzon himself had supported in principle. It was mainly an initiative of the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, who wanted to concentrate on the growing threat from Germany and found the Russians for the first time responsive to the idea after defeat by Japan and the abortive revolution of December 1905 had shaken their self-confidence. The Convention created a Russian sphere of interest over the whole of Northern and Central Persia, a British sphere of interest in the south-east and a neutral zone in the south-

west which also included most of the Gulf littoral. Britain and Russia agreed not to seek political and commercial concessions from the Persian Government in each other's sphere of interest, although both could compete in the neutral zone. In the preamble to the Convention, they pledged "to respect the independence and integrity of Persia", but as far as the Persians were concerned the two powers had carved up the country between them.

This was not at all the division into spheres of interest which Curzon had once contemplated. It gave Russia eleven out of the twelve largest cities and seven out of the eleven recognized trade routes. It also abandoned his key policy of not allowing other nations to establish a base in the Gulf. "...we have thrown away to a large extent the efforts of our diplomacy and our trade for more than a century;" he told the House of Lords," and I do not feel at all sure that this Treaty in its Persian aspect will conduce either to the security of India, to the independence of Persia or to the peace of Asia." He also denounced the Liberal Government's "effrontery" in assuring other countries of its intention of preserving their integrity while parcelling out their territory without even consulting them.

Before the Anglo-Russian Convention, Britain had won great esteem in Persia because of the support given by the British Legation in Tehran to the Constitutional Revolution which broke out at the end of 1905. Russia, on the other hand, had stood firmly behind the autocratic rule of the Shah. The Convention which aligned Britain with Russia was therefore seen by Persians as a terrible betrayal and never again would they believe in Britain's good intentions. Curzon himself would pay the price of that.

In the meantime he was given a long overdue earldom in the coronation honours of 1911 and finally returned to office during the First World War, joining the wartime coalition cabinet under Asquith in May 1915. After Asquith was forced to step down in favour of Lloyd George in December 1916, he became one of the five members of Lloyd George's war cabinet and played a leading role in the conduct of the war. Persia now had an added importance for Britain, which was oil. The huge oil reserves of south-west Persia had been discovered and exploited by a British concessionaire and were fuelling the ships of the Royal Navy, which went over from coal to oil in 1912. Although the Persian government declared its neutrality in the war, the country was fought over by Ottoman and Russian forces in the north, while in the south German agents had some success in stirring up the tribes and threatening the oil-fields until a British-officered Persian force, the South Persia Rifles, managed to regain control. In March 1918 Curzon was made chairman of a new Eastern Committee of the war cabinet which was much preoccupied with Persia, where Russian troops had been withdrawn

following the October Revolution and additional British and Indian troops had to be sent in to fill the gap. By the time the war ended Britain was in a position of unchallenged supremacy, occupying much of the country and keeping what passed for a government afloat with subsidies. But Persia was in desperate straits. Its economy was in ruins, bandits infested the roads and tens of thousands were dying of famine and disease.

Curzon saw this as a unique opportunity to realize a vision he had had before him ever since that journey through Persia thirty years earlier. It was for Britain to extend a helping hand to Persia, to make her strong and to enable her to take her place in a chain of friendly states stretching from the Mediterranean to the Pamirs, a bulwark protecting India and the line of communications with Britain's imperial possessions further east. He immediately began working for an agreement which would put Britain in charge of the reconstruction of Persia. The young ruler of Persia, Ahmad Shah, who had a craving for money and longed only to escape from a country he described to one visitor as "*très désagréable*", was persuaded to appoint a pro-British prime minister, Vosuq ud-Dawleh in return for a monthly allowance of £5,000. Sir Percy Cox, who had spent many years in Bushire as the British Resident in the Persian Gulf and had worked closely with Curzon when he was Viceroy, was appointed interim Minister in Tehran. Curzon dismissed suggestions from some on the Eastern Committee that Britain should withdraw from Persia altogether as "immoral, feeble and disastrous", and brushed aside warnings from the India Office and the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, against excessive interference in Persia as likely to provoke a nationalist backlash. In January 1919, Curzon took charge of the Foreign Office, while Balfour, who remained Foreign Secretary, accompanied Lloyd George to the Peace Conference at Versailles. This gave him virtually complete freedom to determine policy towards Persia.

Through the first half of 1919 Sir Percy Cox conducted negotiations on the agreement sought by Curzon with the Persian Prime Minister, Vosuq ud-Dawleh, and two other pro-British ministers, Nosrat ud-Dawleh, the justice minister and later foreign minister, and Sarem ud-Dawleh, the finance minister. They became known in British circles as "the Triumvirate". Vosuq was a cultured, courageous and able politician from a distinguished bureaucratic family, who had already served once as prime minister during the war. "Upstanding, handsome and reserved," writes Harold Nicolson, "he combined the traditional distinction of his race with that polish that Vevey and Montreux can add to the culture of Iran." Nosrat ud-Dawleh and Sarem ud-Dawleh were both Qajar princes who had held office during the war. Sarem ud-Dawleh was generally believed to have shot his mother on the instructions

of his father on a point of honour. Lord Chelmsford warned from Delhi that the Triumvirate were “a very uncertain barometer of public opinion”.

A potential problem for Curzon was the arrival in Paris of a Persian delegation, which knew nothing of the negotiations going on in Tehran and was seeking the financial and military assistance from the Versailles Peace Conference which Curzon was determined that Britain alone would provide. He ensured that the delegation was kept in the dark and that Britain gave no support to its request for a hearing, which was consequently turned down by the Conference on the grounds that Persia had not been a belligerent. One aspect of the negotiations which Curzon found personally very repugnant were the demands by the Shah and the Triumvirate to be financially rewarded for their efforts, although ostensibly the large sum sought by the Triumvirate was to help them sell the agreement – “palm oil”, as Cox called it. Curzon reluctantly agreed to a payment of £131,000 to the Triumvirate, but the Shah had to be content with a promise to maintain his existing subsidy so long as he gave loyal support to Vosuq’s government.

The Anglo-Persian Agreement was finally announced on the 9th of August 1919. After a pledge “to respect absolutely the independence and integrity of Persia”, Britain undertook to provide, in consultation with the Persian Government, expert advisers for the various branches of the administration and officers and munitions for the creation of a national army. It also undertook to help with railway construction and other forms of transport, and to take part in a joint committee to revise the customs tariff so that it should accord “with the legitimate interests of the country and promote its prosperity.” To finance the necessary reforms, Britain was making available a loan of £2 million at 7 percent interest, secured on the revenues of the Persian Gulf ports.

Curzon viewed the Agreement with pride. “It was”, he told his second wife, “a great triumph as I have done it all alone.” To begin with, all appeared to go well. British military and financial commissions were despatched to Persia, and Curzon spoke of Britain as Persia’s natural ally at a celebratory dinner in London in the presence of Prince Firouz Nosrat ud-Dawleh. But the secrecy which had surrounded the negotiations, the rumours which began to circulate of bribes being paid to the Triumvirate, and the mistrust of Britain which had deepened since the Anglo-Russian Convention, all helped to arouse strong opposition to the Agreement in Persia, where it was seen as an attempt to turn the country into a British protectorate in all but name. There was also opposition from France and the United States and particularly from the new Bolshevik regime in Russia, which, in contrast to Britain, was now looked on with favour by many Persians for renouncing the unequal

treaties, concessions and loans of the Tsarist era. Under the new Persian constitution, the Agreement could not come into force until it was ratified by the parliament, but given the public mood Vosuq was not inclined to summon parliament, which had been in recess since 1915. The final blow to the Agreement came in May 1920 when Bolshevik troops landed at Enzeli on the south-west Persian coast of the Caspian, and the British commander ordered his heavily outnumbered force to withdraw. It was a severe blow to British prestige, demonstrating that Britain was unable to protect Persia. The following month Vosuq ud-Dowleh resigned. His successor Mushir ud-Dowleh, declared the Agreement to be 'in abeyance' and it was finally cancelled after the coup of February the 21st 1921 which brought the future Riza Shah to power. Shortly before that, Curzon expressed his anger and hurt in a scribbled minute to the new British Minister in Tehran, Herman Norman, who had suggested a new agreement be negotiated. "I will never propose another agreement with the Persians", he wrote, "Nor, unless they come on their knees, would I ever consider any application from them and probably not then. In future we will look after our own interests in Persia not theirs." Most Persians believed that that was what Britain had been doing all the time.

Curzon went on to achieve a diplomatic triumph at the Lausanne Conference in 1923 by resolving difficult and contentious issues with a resurgent Turkey. But nothing could compensate for his deep disappointment at not achieving that consummation he had looked forward to with so much hope in *Persia and the Persian Question*, "when Persia shall look upon Great Britain as her most natural ally, and Great Britain upon Persia as her willing friend." As Harold Nicolson, who worked under him at the Foreign Office, wrote, it was the "most galling, because the most personal, of his many diplomatic defeats". In a way, he found it much harder to accept than that other bitter disappointment he suffered shortly after Lausanne, when he was passed over for the premiership in favour of Baldwin.

For the rest of his life – he died in 1925 – he blamed his failure in Persia on others. But the principal fault was his in failing to recognize the rising tide of nationalism in Persia, the widespread suspicion of British motives, and the limitations of British power in the aftermath of the Great War, all of which were considerable, if not insuperable obstacles in the way of the Agreement.

In Search of the Shahnameh.

Lecture given by Nick Jubber on 25th January 2011, with excerpts from his book, *Drinking Arak off an Ayatollah's Beard*.

Hello everybody, and thanks for coming along.

So I'm in a big dusty car park, surrounded by men in knee-length shirts and baggy trousers, and huge beards (that make my own seem like a mouse squaring up to a grizzly bear!) and they walk around with an incredible air of authority. They are the first Afghans I've met, and I'm at the Iranian-Afghan border. Well our bus has inevitably broken down, and whilst we're waiting for it to be fixed, one of these giants takes an interest in me. Actually, it's not me he's interested in, it's the book I'm holding. A huge tome of 1500 pages: the *Shahnameh*, the Book of Kings. Now, to me it's a wonderful book – stories about a prince who ends up with snakes bursting out of his shoulders, a talking bird, battles with shaggy-coated horned demons and later on recognisable historical characters like Alexander the Great – but essentially these are old legends, tales of a time now gone.

But not to this guy. 'You're reading my book?' he says. 'The book of my country? You want to find out how we defeat our enemies?' And as I look into his eyes, I realise this book – it's not long ago, not to him. It's now. Past and present, joined together in a strange kind of harmony.

Well, throughout my travels around Iran, Central Asia and Afghanistan, I came across many different ways in which Ferdowsi's world proved to be thrillingly alive; ways in which it resonated for people in the Persian-speaking world. I met artists, poets and theatre directors who were inspired by the *Shahnameh*, minstrels who still recite it, academics who puzzle over its meanings, sportsmen who exercise to its verses, and ordinary men and women who pay visits to Ferdowsi's tomb and still cherish his stories, who still love the *Shahnameh* and everything it stands for. So what I'm going to do this evening is show you a few photographs from my travels and talk about some of the occasions on my journey when Ferdowsi's ghost seemed to come bursting out of the shadows.

So the first and one of the most important instances for me, takes us to Tehran, because it was Ferdowsi in a roundabout kind of way who got me my digs. I'd been invited over by a friendly young Iranian to meet his family and over the dinner table the father grilled me about the somewhat dubious activities of the British government in the 1950s – when Winston Churchill

managed to persuade the Americans that Iran was about to go Communist. As a result a coup was arranged, and Iran lost the man who was probably its greatest prime minister. And all because the British government wanted to hold onto its oil profits. Well, this was the story my host was lambasting me with, and I really wasn't feeling like a very popular guest as I tucked into his wife's delicious okra stew. However, as soon as I mentioned my interest in Ferdowsi, everything changed. Suddenly, I was over by the bookcase, I was having one ancient tome after another thrust in my arms, and I was being commanded – in that emphatic and magnificently generous way that is so common in Iran – that whenever I was in Tehran, this was to be my home. Well, just how much my host adored Ferdowsi and his stories was hammered home one afternoon when we found ourselves underneath a certain statue...

Excerpt 1

"There he is!"

One afternoon in early spring, when the crocuses were starting to come out in the parks and fresh white asphodels were filling up the glass florists' shops on the roadsides, the Professor met me outside the Literature Faculty of Tehran University. Taking off his homburg and holding it in front of him, he stood, in a respectful bow. Above us, sitting cross-legged on a cushion, with the end of his turban draped over his shoulder, was the poet Ferdowsi. If he didn't happen to be made out of bronze, you might imagine he was sitting in a teahouse, ready to recite one of his tales.

"So is he your favourite poet?" I asked.

"Favourite?" The Professor snorted. "Favourite has nothing to do with it. Look at him, he is more even than a poet, he is . . ."

He stopped for a moment, as if he needed to work this one out.

"He is . . . the most Persian Persian who ever lived. Yes, that is it—the most Persian Persian. Do you understand?"

"I think so."

There was a bench nearby. The Professor lowered himself onto it, holding the armrest as he looked at the poet.

"In your culture," he said, "people do not remember poetry, do they?"

"Well, some people do."

"But not everyone? You see, child? In Iran, everyone remembers poetry. Everyone can remember lines from Ferdowsi, for example. This is why he is so important! Without him, we would not speak Persian. Without him, we would have no history, no heritage. Without him, we would be like all the other countries the Arabs attacked—we would be extinct! An Iranian, a

Persian speaker, would be the same as a dodo or a Phoenician. People would talk about it as if it was something from the past."

As I stood looking at the bronze poet from a thousand years ago, it was as if I were watching him come to life. As if his toes were starting to twitch inside those curly-ended shoes and his lips were quivering over his long twisting beard. Without this extraordinary figure from the past, Iran would have no present. Which made him more important to the country today than any other aspect of its culture. Because Ferdowsi and his Shahnameh represent the national cultural DNA.

"He was a farmer from the east of our country," said the Professor, "a province called Khorasan, near the border with Afghanistan. He saw that our Persian culture was in decline—ever since the Arabs invaded, they tried to make us speak Arabic and even if they didn't succeed, many Arabic words became stuck in our language, like mud on your shoes when you have fallen in the dirt. So he decided to do something about it. You have to understand who this man was! He loved everything that made us Persian. He loved drinking wine, he loved our literature and our history, he loved the land, the mountains, the rivers, the sun. Oh yes, he was a Muslim—but more than that he was Persian! So for thirty-five years he worked without stopping, purifying the language all the way to its roots and collecting the legends and the history of the days before the Arabs came, the time of the shahs. Then he took his book, the Shahnameh, to the richest lord in this part of the world—Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni."

And what happened when he took that book to Sultan Mahmud we will come to later.

Now one of the things that's so extraordinary about the *Shahnameh* is the range of ways in which you come across it. This is not a poem that's simply restricted to the deepest corners of university libraries. It's a truly living, breathing poem, open to new interpretations and used in all sorts of very surprising situations. The last place I would ever have expected to come across epic medieval poetry was the place I'm going to describe to you next. Because now I'm going to talk about the *zurkhanehs* – the Strength Houses – which are effectively the traditional Iranian version of the gym.

Excerpt 2

...seated on a marble pulpit, with an otter-skin drum between his thighs, was a man in a damp blue vest called Akbar. He was reciting prayers to Imam Ali, while the men underneath him—standing in a metre-deep octagonal pit, most of them in vests and many with loincloths around their waists—were chanting the names of the twelve imams. Whenever someone new arrived, Akbar slammed a bell under a mirror work arch. If the new arrival was especially venerable, he rapped on the drum as well. All around me, I could hear the religious verses and holy names, hanging in the air like talismans of Islam.

“Thanks for coming,” said Reza, who was in the process of wrapping his own loincloth. His bare chest was already soaked in sweat, which glistened in the glare from a skylight. “What do you think?” he asked.

“Well . . . it’s not like the gyms back home.”

He smiled. “We call it a zurkhaneh.” A “strength house.” “You know it’s the oldest sport in Iran? We’ve been doing it since the time of Cyrus the Great.” Reza picked up a mulberry-wood block, setting it on the floor of the pit and performing push-ups on top of it. As I was watching him, an old man in an astrakhan hat lowered himself onto a bench near me, facing the pit. He invited me to sit next to him, introducing himself as “Sede Ismail,” and calling to a boy to bring us tea. He poured his glass onto a saucer to cool it, placing it against his mouth and tipping the contents down his throat, all the time lifting his eyes to watch the men in the pit. Hanging on the wall behind us was a series of framed black-and-white photographs. Bare-chested men stood proudly in leather plus fours, swinging large wooden dumbbells or packed together in matching shirts, like a rugby team. Among these figures was Takhti, the national hero, who won gold for freestyle wrestling at the 1956 Olympic Games but was poisoned in his prime because he insulted the shah’s brother.

“We call these men pahlavans,” explained Sede Ismail. “But Takhti was the greatest, so we called him ‘Pahlavan of the World’ (which is the same title given to the hero Rostam in the Shahnameh).”

We continued looking at the photographs, but a drumbeat was resounding. All eyes turned to Akbar, who was about to start a new recital:

*Alighting, they tied both their steeds to a boulder;
Advancing in casque and the garb of a soldier;
Though troubled at heart, each as fierce as a pard,
They wrestled and parried till sweaty and scarred . . .*

Sweat was dripping off Akbar's brow as he recited, while the men in the pit did their push-ups on the mulberry-wood blocks. They were bathed in the sunbeams pouring through the skylight, their bodies yo-yoing to the rhythm of the verse. I was riveted, not because of the speed with which they were performing, nor the stage-like synchronicity (which became even more pronounced when one of them juggled with a pair of dumbbells, spinning around the pit like a whirling dervish), but because the words were from the Shahnameh.

"It is poetry," said Akbar, when I asked him why he recited these verses, "and Ferdowsi makes us feel strong. He writes about sports and battles, so he is good for the strength house."

Now, as anyone who's been to or is from Iran will know, it's a country chock-full of secrets, where surfaces are often very different from what lies beneath them. Perhaps the community that's most clouded in secrecy is that of the Zoroastrians. I'd come across Zoroastrian culture a lot in Tehran, because much of it has survived in modern Iranian culture: details like the Nowruz new year festival, which is an old Zoroastrian custom; the tradition of *haft sin* (the 7 objects beginning with S set in people's houses); or *Char Shanbe Suri* ('Red Wednesday') when people jump over fires and call out a ritual phrase – 'my yellow for your red', asking for the red energy of the flames to be exchanged for the yellow of the weariness of the previous year; or the tradition among many young Iranians of wearing the *faravahar* – the symbol of a winged man with a ring around his waist – as a necklace hidden under their shirts. But it was in the city of Yazd – a stronghold of Zoroastrianism – that I hoped to meet some Zoroastrians myself.

So I set out on the train to Yazd - and received a somewhat frosty reception. Now, in Yazd even the doors hold secrets, with different shaped knockers for men and women, and the same sense of mystery pervaded the home where I stayed, having been introduced to a Zoroastrian family living there. But hospitable as they were, they didn't seem very keen to talk to me. It wasn't until a few nights in - when I mentioned Ferdowsi - that the father finally started to thaw, which led eventually to his son taking me to the most sacred place in Zoroastrian Iran today.

Ferdowsi's epic poem is full of stories about fire: Siyavash riding through a ring of fire to prove his innocence, his son Kai Khusrau taming a land where fire spurts out of the ground, the prophet Zoroaster hurled into a holy fire by the invading soldiers of Turan. Nothing symbolizes Zoroastrianism more, and there is none more sacred than the fire of Bahram. It was lit in the time of the ancient kings, drawing the shahs in prayer and kept alive in hidden places after the Arab conquest until it was established, in the medieval era, in Yazd. I was eager to see it. It would be a glimpse of history, of where the past and the Zoroastrian present came together. But there was one ever-so-slightly niggling obstacle: Non-Zoroastrians weren't allowed to look at it. Which takes us to my last afternoon in Yazd, standing at the end of a narrow street, with Siyavash placing a white cotton prayer cap on my head. In front of us was a wooden gate, with a board fixed to the brick archway above it:

ENTRANCE ONLY FOR ZOROASTRIANS

The gate was ajar; behind it, the sort of garden Alice could have visited. Pink roses were peeking out of the bushes, pomegranates hung in the groves like baubles, and the high tapering cypress trees soared over everything: a secret, walled Persian garden. A brick wall contained them at the back, decorated with floral-patterned tiles and spilling out with steps, which carried a priest dressed in a white coat and cap—like a British milkman. He nodded to Siyavash and frowned at me, but Siyavash and the prayer cap reassured him of my credentials. The Zoroastrian scripture, the Avesta, contains prayers and hymns to Ahura Mazda—the Zoroastrian God—as well as ecclesiastical codes, penances, ways to defeat evil spirits, and blessings, all composed over several centuries in the first millennium BCE. A copy lay on a shelf in the prayer chamber. Siyavash flicked through its pages, at the same time untying the koshti, a plaited cord at his waist. Moments later, the light from a row of metal bars gleamed on his face as slow, respectful steps carried him toward the silver urn protected behind them.

Here it was—the sacred cipher of the Zoroastrians. The ancient flame that burned not only when Ferdowsi was alive, but when many of the kings from his tales were breathing too. I had been anticipating the most spectacular of pyres. Instead . . . I was standing in front of a little yellow glimmer that wouldn't have been able to withstand a birthday-cake blow. After all I had read and heard about sacred Zoroastrian fires—what a letdown! I'd come here to meet the King of the Kindling, and instead I'd found an old dying

crone. But something was happening in the chamber. A wizened man in white (the priestly caretaker, known as the herbad) was dawdling around the fire. He picked up a metal spade, shovelled the ash aside, and lifted a spare billet onto the urn, stripped of its bark to remove impurities. It was only now—and only slowly—that the flames started to expand. They swelled and stretched, spreading their arms like an old dancer who's just remembered she still knows all the moves, tilting and swaying and belly-dancing over the crackling wood. Red embers sparkled above them like the rings on the dancer's fingers, disappearing among the puffs of smoke that flattened themselves against the ceiling.

*Looking at it now, it was easy to imagine the VIPs who had stood before this fire in the past. I saw them kicking off their boots after a day on the hunt, ritually washing themselves before they prayed. I thought of all the fire-themed stories I'd read in the *Shahnameh*, and, more generally, of the importance of light in Persian culture: the light shining off the facets of mirrorwork in the mosques, the candles at ashoura events, the image of the sun, used as a symbol for the shahs as well as Imam Ali.*

Siyavash's fingers were gripping the metal bars. His lips barely moved as he whispered his prayers, the ancient words mixing with the smoke. His eyes were fixed on that extraordinary, resilient, 1,400-year-old flame, dancing before him now as it had once danced, so many centuries ago, for the ancient kings.

Well, many Zoroastrians feel they are the true guardians of the stories told in the *Shahnameh*. But I met plenty of Muslim Iranians who really cherish Ferdowsi's stories as well – and Ferdowsi after all wasn't a Zoroastrian himself. So I'm going to turn to the region of the Bakhtiari, who live in the Zagros Mountains of southern Iran – because there was no area of the country where I found people so devoted to the stories told by Ferdowsi. Because this is the region where you can find the *Shahnameh-khwans* (or 'readers of the Book of Kings') - from a butcher who recited in his shop, spinning out more than a hundred lines as his customers patiently waited for him to cut their meat; to a farmer who used to recite stories about the hero Rostam when he was reaping his crops and told me that when he recited, 'everybody would work much faster. If it wasn't for the *Shahnameh*, we would have been out in those fields a lot longer!', to a schoolboy who told me he would recite the tragic story of Rostam and Sohrab and his teachers would have tears in their eyes. But there was one *Shahnameh-khwan* who really stood out for me, and I'm now going to tell you his story.

Mohammed was a lean man in his fifties, with a whiskery, ferret-like face. He sat in his armchair, behind a cloud of cigarette smoke and tea steam. Twenty years before, he explained, he had been a soldier in the long, terrible war with Iraq.

"We were on the border at Shahramshahr," he said, "about a hundred of us in the division. We had to fight a lot—if we stopped concentrating even for a moment they would wipe us out. I remember filling up my rucksack with grenades and crossing the bridges the Arabs had built, running through the marshes with our rusty old Kalashnikovs. When we were in the trenches, we would be leaning over the sandbags with our Kalashes, shooting at the enemy, and you could hear the sound of the bullets all around you. Sometimes the enemy got close and we needed encouragement, so I knew what would work. I recited from the Shahnameh. I raised my voice as loud as I could, so everyone could hear it over the sound of the fighting, and I recited from 'Rostam and Sohrab.' I recited from other stories too, but 'Rostam and Sohrab' was always the best one for getting people in the mood. I would be shooting at the same time, trying to concentrate on my Kalash and looking out for the enemy, reciting maybe twenty or thirty couplets at once. And I have to tell you, there was a great difference. The men became so much stronger—they were inspired!"

I thought of Toghrul Arsalan, prince of the Seljuk Turks in the eleventh century, who is said to have quoted from the Shahnameh as he rode out to battle. But that was centuries ago, soon after the verses had been composed. With Mohammed, the talk was of burning tanks and trenches filled with corpses, of barbed-wire entanglements and minefields, of mortar dropping like rain and a mustard bomb that put him in hospital for several months. He was speaking about a modern, brutal, technologically sophisticated war. Yet he and his comrades still drew inspiration from the thousand-year-old verses of Ferdowsi.

"Because of my voice," said Mohammed, "they always asked me to recite at the death ceremonies. I read the Nawheh mourning prayer, and many times I also read from Shahnameh. There is so much in Ferdowsi—things to make you angry, things to help when you are sad. When I was reading Shahnameh, everyone listened. We were fighting for Iran, so what is better to read than the book of our history? I remember once, the Iraqis attacked and we shot some of them and dragged the wounded back to our camp. They shouted, 'God is Great! Khomeini help us!' and we made them our prisoners. When they heard me reciting from Shahnameh, they became very scared. They didn't

understand Persian, but they knew it was epic poetry and it made us strong. They didn't need to know the words to understand that!"

So let's imagine Ferdowsi in his 70s now. He's finally, after nearly four decades, put together his epic poem and he wants to take it to Sultan Mahmud – the most powerful man in this part of the world, who Ferdowsi believes has offered him a gold dinar for every couplet – which, given that he's written 60,000 of them, is going to need several camels to carry it all back home. And Sultan Mahmud is certainly known as a munificent patron of poets – but he's also known as a religious bigot, a man obsessed with conquest who once killed so many people in battle that his hand was welded to his sword with congealed blood; and a man of exceptional ugliness, thanks to his penchant for eating clay. Well, unfortunately Ferdowsi didn't meet Mahmud on one of his good days. For all his hard work, he was given a mere sack of silver, a prize he considered so insulting that he threw it away on a bath attendant and a sherbet seller, and scribbled a satire into the back of his poem before leaving it in the court library – wisely, he then hot-footed it out of there, knowing exactly how the Sultan would react: by ordering his soldiers to trample that scurrilous poet under the royal elephants.

Well, I felt rather sorry for Ferdowsi, for the disappointment he experiences after devoting his life to producing this epic poem, so I decided to follow him on his journey to Sultan Mahmud's court, and so after going back to Iran I headed east to the slightly discomforting border with Afghanistan.

Now here is Herat – a city of roadside craters slowly being filled to the tune of workmen's jackhammers, huge minarets patched with the remains of blue tiling, auto-rickshaws tuk-tuking past the florists' shops, bicycle bells and lots of grapes – which were the chief export of Herat in Ferdowsi's day – and a fair few plastic kites swooping over the rooftops.

And poets. Because Herat is the cultural capital of Afghanistan – just as it was in Ferdowsi's day. I met academics who'd taught in the Taliban era by smuggling in banned books and getting the female students to pretend they were going to sewing classes; there was a poet who moaned that, whilst life was better than under the Taliban, he'd lost the main inspiration for his outrage – basically, the Taliban had been his muse; and there was one lively poet who was doubling as a florist, who saw a particular connection between himself and Ferdowsi.

Short and squat, with a blue waistcoat over his shalwar qameez, Jalali has a bald, shiny head like an enamelled egg, tufted around the sides with scrags of hair. There is something of the gnome about him as he waddles into his shop and hauls himself onto a stool. Strings of marigolds dangle off the shelves above him, while button daisies and begonias are lying in cellophane wrapping, alongside a bunch of plastic ferns, and the familiar smell of the florist's—earthy as well as fragrant—wafts around us.

"I write about the suffering of the people," he announces, leaning close as he adds, "so of course in the Taliban time I had plenty of material! I had to distribute my poems in secret—after all, I didn't want them to kill me. But they still took me to jail six times, once for seven months."

"Why?" I ask.

"I wrote a poem about the Taliban—I said they are onions. Because their turbans look like onions and they are as brainless as vegetables. But they couldn't prove it was me, so they only jailed me."

He shakes his head as the memories express themselves in his frown.

"No radio, no paper . . . Oh! Can you imagine what this is like for a writer? And all we ever got to eat was bread, bread, bread!"

His poems have the earthy, irreverent texture of the medieval satirists. One compares the Taliban's moral police to "long-tailed donkeys." Another mocks Mullah Omar (the Taliban leader), when he paraded the Prophet Mohammed's sacred cloak in Kandahar, describing him as dung dressed in an ass hide.

"I wrote whenever I could," says Jalali, "as long as there was kerosene I would write throughout the night. And I hid my poems in a secret place in my house."

"But how did people read your poems?" I ask.

"Sometimes they didn't need to. The children would hear my verses and chant them behind the backs of the Taliban, and then they would run away before they were caught."

It wasn't only the Taliban he criticized. He speaks of Ismail Khan and the other mujahideen leaders with equal contempt, because after the Soviets withdrew they went on pilgrimage to Mecca and announced the fighting was over.

"But then," he fumes, "they came back and the fighting started all over again! So I criticized them, because that is a writer's duty, isn't it? Throughout history, most poets were on the side of the leader. If you look at the kings and their courts, they were always full of poets, terrible poets—dishing out praise

and grovelling on their knees, just so the rulers would fill up their mouths with gold. But not all of them!

You know about Sadi Salman? No? Well, let me tell you about him — he wasn't on the side of the leader. He was for the people! And because of this he was in jail for twenty years in the time of the Ghaznavids."

A customer has come in, asking for a funeral wreath. Jalali drops off his stool, taking me by the arm to the door, peering out onto the street to check the wrong people aren't listening. I can hear the auto rickshaws tuk-tuking past, and the cawing of the pigeon-doves in a plane tree over the road.

"You know how many poets there were in Herat under the Taliban?" he says.

"Maybe thirty. But I was the one in jail, because I was the one who spoke for the people. It's the same with Ferdowsi. He was for the people, not for the leaders, and this is why he had such a big problem with Sultan Mahmud."

He rubs his palms together, filling the air with a long, resigned sigh and the earthy scent of his hands.

"If you are for the people," he adds, "you will always suffer."

Now I'm not going to say too much about Helmand and how I got myself across it – I want to leave a few secrets for the book! – but suffice it to say that I reached the other side of Afghanistan's scariest province thanks to a beard, a local guide and a story about losing my voice – and found myself in Ghazni. And here – at the very place where Ferdowsi was snubbed – I met the most powerful man in Ghazni today – the governor!

Excerpt 6

It's hard to tell exactly which one he is, since there's nothing in his shalwar qameez to distinguish him from his companions (it would have been a lot easier in Ferdowsi's time—when the governors of Sultan Mahmud's empire always wore pointed hats, girdles, and cloaks to mark them out from the riff-raff). But a soldier nods toward the man at the front as the group proceeds into the lobby, and with one hand on my chest I announce: "Peace be upon you."

"You are a foreigner?" he asks in Persian.

That convincing, huh? I offer a meek nod and press a hand on my chest, to which he responds by asking what the hell I'm doing in Ghazni.

"I am a traveller," I say. "I have come a great distance to . . . um . . .

well, to give to Sultan Mahmud . . . my respect. Yes, that's it . . . my respect and great regard."

I'm trying to think of the most flowery Persian words I know: Once again, I'm leaning on code, acting up to get on someone's good side.

He looks me up and down, slowly. "You are mad?"

Now he turns to Hassan-Gul, who is standing beside me. I say standing; in fact, he's bent nearly double with his eyes on the floor.

"You are his guide?" asks the governor.

Hassan-Gul mumbles, "By the will of God."

"And you let him go to these places?"

The governor has pulled himself so high over my guide that I think for a moment he's going to beat him. But he shifts his shoulders back and turns to me instead.

"You do know that two mullahs have been killed in our province in the last two weeks?" he says. "The enemy is attacking anywhere it can."

"Well, yes, I suppose," I say, trying to curry his favour with a smile.

"But what about Sultan Mahmud?" This is what I really want to know. "Why are you praying at his tomb?"

For a moment, the governor looks at me with the same ferocity he's shown to Hassan-Gul, and I wonder if he will beat me instead. But his frown melts and his face flattens into the model of stiff-jawed, statesmanlike pride.

"Sultan Mahmud," he announces, "is the greatest person in Afghan history. He is the greatest for religion, and for empire. When he ruled, Ghazni was the capital of a great empire. In India they don't like him because he conquered them, and in Iran because of Ferdowsi, but here in Afghanistan you will find he is liked very much."

The gate swings open and his lackeys usher him toward a jeep with blacked-out windows.

"Now—you," he says, turning on Hassan-Gul, "take this foreigner and leave Ghazni at once!"

Now the final picture I'm going to show you is Ferdowsi's tomb. It's said that, having left Ghazni empty-handed, he lived out his last days both broke and broken. One day he heard a small boy reciting a verse that he recognised – because it was his! And he was so pleased to realise that his poem really was going to survive, that he died on the spot. It's also said that, around the same time, one of Sultan Mahmud's ministers recited a verse by Ferdowsi in the middle of a siege. The Sultan was so impressed by the verse that he asked who'd written it, and when he was told he ordered a full 60,000 dinars' worth of indigo to be dispatched to the poet. Well it was too late. The sultan's camels carried the gift through one gate as the poet's body was being carried out through the other, and the poet's daughter – staying loyal to her father's

indignation – refused to accept the gift on his behalf. As you can see, there's now a spectacular mausoleum, built by the last Shah's father in the style of Cyrus the Great – arguably the most popular of all Iran's historical kings...

So that's the story of my adventure in Ferdowsi's world. I think there are many different Irans, many different ways to approach that extraordinary country and its remarkable neighbours; but I can't imagine any way of travelling there that could show how tightly past and present are bound together – so I'm very grateful to this irascible, hot-tempered, often snobbish and jingoistic but utterly human and magnificent poet – for all his amazing stories, but also for the light that he continues to shine on the modern Persian-speaking world.

So thank you everyone for listening to me...

THE AZARBAIJAN CRISIS OF 1945–1946: the catalyst of the 50-year Cold War.

Lecture given by Dr Fereydoun Ala on 23rd June, 2011.



Hossein Ala – New York 1946

On June 22nd, 1941, Hitler attacked and invaded the Soviet Union.

Resistance was poor and the blitzkrieg was devastatingly effective.

Although Anthony Eden had already twice warned Ivan Maisky the Soviet Ambassador in London, of Axis intentions, and even proposed a delegation to Moscow in order to estimate Russian needs at least 20 days before Hitler's invasion, this was dismissed as rumour. Pathological suspicion of Britain was paramount in Stalin's mind, and remained so until Roosevelt's death in 1945.

Churchill and Eden, witnessing the rapid advance of German forces, feared for their interests in Persian oil and India. They reasoned that support for Russia would diminish pressure on Europe; would save Britain, and would be the likeliest cause for a German defeat. The Murmansk 'run' was too hazardous due to submarines and the forbidding ice-packs for 6 months of the year. The best conduit for conveying war materiel to the beleaguered Russians was therefore via the Persian Gulf, using Reza Shah's railway and new roads to the Caspian, where armament could be shipped to Volga ports and Stalingrad.

Although Iran had already twice declared her neutrality (Sept. 4th, 1939, and June 6th, 1941), a convenient 'Casus Belli' was constituted by the much-exaggerated 'Fifth Column' in Iran, and Reza Shah's German proclivities, which were, by the way, shared by most of the Iranian ruling class. After all, Iran had suffered decades of bullying by both the bear and the bull-dog (the 1907 Russo-British division of the country into zones of influence, as well as the more recent Curzon inspired 1919 proposals which would have turned Iran into a British protectorate), and now an alternative, highly successful potential saviour was looming from the West. In fact, while the Russians claimed there were 7,000 Germans working in Iran at the time, a more realistic, unbiased estimate by a US observer put the figure at no more than 700 to 900.

Incidentally, while in 1932 only 8% of trade was from Germany, by 1939 this portion had grown to 45%. Indeed, the north-south railway created by Reza Shah (paid for from taxes on sugar and tea), and built by Kampsax, was largely German – the rolling stock, training bursaries, cadre of engineers were all German.

Churchill accordingly put his proposals to Franklin Roosevelt who, as a devoted Wilsonian, shrank from the invasion of a neutral country. The more pragmatic Churchill (*Inter arma silent leges*) arguing that only the USA could aid Russia and relieve Europe, effectively persuaded FDR to participate, and the two leaders met in August 1941, on a naval ship in mid-Atlantic to discuss future strategy.

At this historic meeting, the Atlantic Treaty was agreed, and became the main pillar of new international relations; condemning the use of force and

supporting the independence and security of all nations, effectively becoming the basis for the future UN Charter.

Joint notes from the British and Russians were delivered to the Iranian Prime Minister, Ali Mansour, in both July and August, demanding the internment and expulsion of all German citizens. Mansour's vague and dismissive responses were not deemed to be satisfactory.

On August 25th, the Allies invaded Iran: 40,000 Soviet troops from the north (which grew to 60,000 by 1946), and 19,000 British troops from the south. Tehran was occupied on September 17th, 1941, and Reza Shah was forced to abdicate in favour of the Crown Prince, Mohammad Reza.

Lend-Lease supplies to the hard-pressed Soviets by road and through Reza Shah's beloved railway line began immediately, and this 'Bridge of Victory', as it came to be known, delivered altogether 7,000,000 tonnes of armaments, comprising 750 tanks; 4,800 planes; and 80,000 trucks to the USSR over the ensuing 4.5 years.

It was through the insistence of Roosevelt and Cordell Hull, his Secretary of State, that a Tripartite Agreement was drawn up and signed on January 29th, 1942 – a legal 'fig-leaf' upon which to base the occupation of a neutral country, which guaranteed preservation of the territorial integrity and independence, as well as the post-war evacuation of Iran. Stalin was reluctant to subscribe to this agreement, but in his hour of need, he had little choice but to comply.

The Iranian government at this point, was in total disarray: impotent both economically and politically; unable to relieve the inflation and famine which prevailed, or to maintain order among its rebellious tribes. My class at the Community School was flooded with war refugees, many of them gifted musicians and artists, from Eastern European stetls, mostly Jews of Polish or Czechoslovakian origin, bringing with them the usual afflictions of war: crowding, malnutrition and misery, together with louse-borne typhus, which reached epidemic proportions, and killed 3 of my school-mates. There was an acute shortage of wheat as the Russians were requisitioning grain, and supplies were being diverted to refugees; hoarding and black marketeering were rife. US humanitarian efforts to alleviate these shortages were effectively blocked when Britain insisted that all materiel must be channelled through the United Kingdom Commercial Corporation (UKCC) and that Iranians were much given to exaggeration. I clearly remember seeing an example of the coarse, grey bread on sale in bakeries, which contained bits of tarred sacking, and even the remains of a cockroach!

The Communist Party had been outlawed by the Majles in 1937, but on January 30, 1942, immediately after the Tripartite Agreement was signed, the

former communist leaders, who had been languishing in prison for 4 years, were released, and formed the Tudeh Party, headed by Mir Jaafar Pishevari (a Soviet-trained operative, known by a variety of pseudonyms – Seyed Jaafar, Javadzadeh or Soltanzadeh), which was soon to become the most disciplined and effective political force in the country, and the agent for the acquisitive post-war policies of the USSR.

The mortal Russian winter, over-extended German supply lines, and the heroic Soviet defence of Stalingrad, broke the Wehrmacht, and with the end of Nazi aggression in sight, the Tehran Conference was organised on November 28th, 1943, bringing Marshal Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt together to discuss the future.

I recall my father telling us upon returning home one evening at the time, that he had been summoned to see Mr. Churchill at the British Embassy that morning, where the great man had received him in his bath without a trace of embarrassment – round and pink like a baby, smoking his cigar, with a glass of brandy at his elbow!

It was Patrick Hurley, among FDR's most trusted if eccentric aides (who came to Tehran wearing a cowboy 'ten-gallon' hat), who proposed that Iran declared war upon the Axis Powers on December 9th, 1943, and signed on as a member of the new-found United Nations Organisation. The President overtly disparaged traditional Russian and British behaviour towards Iran in the past, and urged the implementation of the principles of the Atlantic Charter with support for Iran after the war.

The Tehran Conference Declaration (most reluctantly signed by Stalin, who was promised a free hand in the Baltic States and Eastern Poland in exchange), recognised Iran's contribution to the war effort, guaranteed her independence and territorial integrity, and made firm commitments to the evacuation of foreign troops, together with financial assistance at the end of hostilities.

By May, 1944, the Normandy landings had been successful; the Soviets were advancing west, and the war's end was in sight, stimulating the aspirations of Shell, Standard Oil and Sinclair who sent their emissaries to bid for concessions in the autumn. Not unexpectedly, the Tudeh Party protested vociferously.

The USSR Central Asian Military Engineering Corps had already covertly investigated potential oil reserves in northern and eastern Iran in 1942, and their report went to Commissar Vladimir Dekanozov and Lavrenti Beria (Deputy Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars). It was he who passed the survey to Joseph Stalin in 1944, urgently proposing that as a great power, the USSR had every right to assert its economic interest in

possessing oil fields in the Middle East, particularly since Britain and the USA were secretly seeking to further their own interests. Accordingly, a high-level delegation headed by Assistant Commissar for Foreign Affairs Sergei Kavtaradze, arrived in Tehran in October '44, demanding oil concessions in five northern provinces of Iran. Despite much bluster and bullying by Kavtaradze, Prime Minister Sa'ed, refused, deferring all such discussions to the war's end.

Soon after, in December, 1944, Parliamentary Deputy Dr. Mossadegh proposed a law forbidding Prime Ministers and members of their cabinet from negotiating commercial concessions of any kind, without express Majles approval. The law was almost unanimously adopted by Deputies, and proved to be highly significant in the months to come, as we shall see.

After several weeks of fruitless discussions, Kavtaradze left Iran in disgust, and empty-handed, and storms of anti-Iranian propaganda from the Soviet press and the Tudeh Party followed.

At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, Iran was desperate for some discussion of the evacuation of occupying forces to be on the agenda, and most particularly, the cessation of Soviet interference and aggression in her north-western provinces, but Molotov succeeded in preventing any mention of Iran. Roosevelt was very sick by this time, and he was reluctant to initiate any discussions which might undermine his efforts to persuade Stalin to support the Dumbarton Oaks Conference resolutions for establishing the United Nations' Charter; the right of veto, the voting system, free elections in Eastern Europe, etc....Indeed, he died not long after on April 12th, and was succeeded by Vice-President Harry Truman.

Only a few months after Germany's unconditional surrender in May, at the Potsdam Conference (July 17th), the hopes of Iran were frustrated yet again. Harry Truman and 'Jimmy' Byrnes his Secretary of State were new and inexperienced, as were Atlee and Bevin, who replaced Churchill and Eden – they were certainly no match for the Soviet leader. Consequently, Stalin got his way in dividing the world as he desired at both these meetings, and their only success was in obtaining Soviet agreement to the meeting of Foreign Ministers in April after much insistence, to finalise the UN Charter and define the powers of the Security Council in San Francisco.

The USSR was a great power now, and Joseph Stalin was flushed with his outstanding success in breaking the back of German aggression, and obtaining most of the post-war concessions he wanted from the United States and Britain at the Yalta and Potsdam conferences, which even the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki early in August, 1945, could not dampen.

On November 15th, 1945, the Azarbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) was declared by Ja'afar Pishevari, and a month later Qazi-Mohammad, head of the Kurdish 'Kumeleh' Party also announced the formation of an autonomous Kurdish Republic. All protests by the government in Tehran, and requests that troops be allowed to restore order, were ignored by the Soviets.

By January, 1946, Prime Minister Ebrahim Hakimi had resigned, but not before deciding that unilateral discussions with the Soviet authorities would lead nowhere, and that Iranian complaints had no hope of success unless they were internationalised. He had therefore instructed Iran's Ambassador in London, Hassan Taqizadeh to raise the government's protest at the forthcoming first session on January 10th, 1946, of the fledgling United Nations General Assembly, the "...arbiter of complaints, equally accessible to all nations, large and small, powerful and weak.." . This was the first complaint of one UN member against another, and of a weak nation against a victorious super-power, which was to be one of the permanent members of the Security Council, with the right of veto.

Taqizadeh's presentation was measured, and highly documented, referring to a 'situation', rather than a grievance, and putting the case that Soviet armed forces were fostering secessionist elements, disrupting life, brow-beating Iranian authorities, and generally interfering with Iran's sovereignty, in contravention of the Tripartite Agreement and Article 14 of the UN Charter, and that this situation constituted a threat to world peace. Andrei Vyshinsky gave an indignant, bad-tempered and ill-considered rebuttal, suggesting the Azari crisis had nothing to do with their armed forces, and merely reflected popular dissatisfaction with the poor governance of a reactionary Iranian government and, of course 'foreign' influence. Indeed, he even invoked the 1921 Concordat, suggesting that admitting Iranian forces to Azarbaijan might not only pose a threat to Soviet interests in Baku, they might also cause further disorder and bloodshed in the province, necessitating the despatch of further Soviet troops. In the event, despite Vyshinsky's every effort to prevent Iran's complaint from being tabled, discussed or included in the Agenda, the Assembly voted formally to adopt the case – a highly significant achievement. It also encouraged both parties to resolve their differences through negotiation, and reserved the right to be informed of the state of these negotiations at any time. Vyshinsky's clumsy and often absurd claims alienated other member nations and exposed the acquisitive and less endearing aspects of 'Uncle Joe' to the world.

Stalin felt confident that Iran's grievance against the Soviet Union could be presented to the world as a minor disagreement between neighbours, which would easily be resolved through bilateral negotiation. He accordingly

instructed Vyshinsky and Gromyko in the United States, that they must prevent Iran's complaint from being included in the UN Security Council Agenda at all costs. The Iranian delegate must under no circumstances be allowed to address the sessions of the Security Council, and the Soviet-supported secessionist movements in Azarbaijan and Kordestan were to be presented as an entirely internal Iranian matter, merely reflecting the legitimate aspirations of the 'down-trodden' peoples of these provinces, for freedom and autonomy. There was some justification for this point, which made the governing elite in Tehran particularly vulnerable to Soviet propaganda among its rural populations.

So soon after the end of war, the Kremlin had already succeeded in building a security buffer in Central Europe and the Far East. Poland had become a Soviet satellite state with hardly a murmur of protest from Harry Truman, and the Kremlin was now intent upon changing its focus towards the Black Sea area, the Dardanelles and eastern Turkey. Hegemony in this region would turn the USSR into a Mediterranean power – one of the cherished dreams of Peter the Great.

These expansionist energies were particularly directed towards oil-rich Iran, where the chances of success were high. After all, northern Iran was still occupied by the Soviet army, Stalin's greatest asset, and while it was still in control, it would be a relatively easy matter to foster Azari nationalist sentiment by manipulating the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party, and creating popular pressure for the 'reunification' of Soviet and Iranian Azarbaijan – the Azari Motherland, which incidentally was said to extend as far as Tehran.

In July, 1945, Stalin had accordingly sanctioned the organisation of national autonomous movements in the provinces of Azarbaijan, Gilan, Mazandaran, Kordestan and Khorasan, together with the provision of armaments, printing presses and money. The local administrative apparatus of the Tehran government was rapidly dismantled by NKVD and Soviet Azarbaijani officials; a revolutionary 'Azarbaijan Democratic Party' was established; Iranian troops and gendarmes were disarmed and confined to barracks; landowners were intimidated and dispossessed; judges arrested, and local Azari militia – *muhajers* in Russian uniform, were armed and trained. Mir Jaafar Baqerov, the First Secretary of the Soviet Azarbaijan Communist Central Committee in Baku, was put in charge of these initiatives, and took great pains never to employ weapons of Russian manufacture. The 'tool-marks' of overt Soviet interference were to be carefully effaced. In consequence, arms were only from foreign sources: Colt, Brno and Browning. Repeated protests from the Iranian Ministry for Foreign Affairs that the Soviet Union was in breach of all its commitments were ignored or given short shrift. All efforts by the central government to send troops to Azarbaijan or Kordestan to quell the disorder created by the separatists were blocked by the Red

Army at Zanjan, west of Tehran. Again, the Politburo justified adoption of this policy “for fear that the presence of Iranian troops would cause violence and bloodshed, requiring the despatch of further Soviet reinforcements”. The Kremlin was short of time, and needed to hurry to implement its programme, and to bully the Iranian government into granting an oil concession in northern Iran as soon as possible. In accord with the 1942 Tripartite Treaty of Alliance between Britain, the USSR and Iran, and the Tehran Conference Declaration of December 1943, Iran was guaranteed its “territorial integrity, sovereignty and political independence”, and all foreign troops were to be withdrawn by March 2nd, 1946, six months after the cessation of hostilities.

The patrician, subtle and highly experienced Ahmad Qavam (Qavam o-Saltaneh), who always treated the young Shah with some contempt as a novice, was appointed Prime Minister on January 26th, 1946 – not without his careful solicitation of the post with the Soviets. Among the first actions of his premiership was to fly to Moscow in a Soviet military plane with a delegation, to seek a resolution of what was now an international crisis, directly with the Soviet government. He was most lavishly received, met for discussions with Stalin no less than three times, and with Molotov four times, and remained for altogether three weeks. Under pressure to grant an oil concession, Qavam could only say that his hands were tied by law, as the Majles had forbidden direct negotiations without their express consent.

Little of any substance resulted from all these meetings and negotiations however, and Qavam was merely advised by Stalin at the magnificent ‘Last Supper’ held in his honour, that all further discussions would be deferred pending the arrival of the new Soviet Ambassador Vasilyevich Sadchikov in Tehran. However, even before Qavam left, a radio Moscow announcement on March 1st that Soviet forces would only ‘partially withdraw from peaceful areas’ of northern Iran, while the rest would remain for an ‘indeterminate’ period caused acute anxiety in Tehran and Washington, where Ambassador Hossein Ala was already sounding the alarm in the US Press and among influential members of the Administration.

Even before Qavam’s return empty-handed on March 11th, Tudeh manifestations in front of the Majles at Baharestan had reached a climax, preventing deputies from entering and reaching a quorum in the dying days of the 14th Majles. With the Majles dissolved, Qavam was left in sole charge of government, to cope with both a chaotic internal situation, and an obdurate, menacing Soviet neighbour.

Indeed, when Robert Rossow, US Vice-Consul in Tabriz reported on March 11th that, rather than evacuating Iranian soil, fresh Soviet armoured columns had poured across the Iranian border, some of which were heading

west towards the Turkish border, the image so fondly fostered by Roosevelt, of a benign 'Uncle Joe', a valiant ally in the struggle against the evil Axis powers, was finally shattered.

With Harry Truman as President, United States policy was undergoing a radical change at this time, and following George Kennan's advocacy of a 'Containment Policy', and Churchill's famous 'Iron Curtain' speech in Fulton Missouri in March, confrontation replaced cooperation in American strategic and military thinking. The decades of 'Cold War' and Soviet isolation which followed, were probably initiated by Stalin's diplomatic mistakes and the openly acquisitive, aggressive stance he adopted in the Iranian case. In addition, after Roosevelt's death, the USSR had progressively lost most of its influential friends in the Administration: Harry Hopkins, Henry Morgenthau, Ickes and other exponents of New Deal politics.

After the unsuccessful Moscow talks, it was almost certainly Taqizadeh, and Hossein Ala, whose previous experience at the League of Nations had made him a strong supporter of such international agencies, who persuaded Qavam o-Saltaneh to appeal to the United Nations Security Council once again. Qavam accordingly instructed Ala to take up Iran's case with the Security Council on March 17th, 1946.

The United Nations in New York

As soon as Ala had arrived to take up his post as Ambassador to the US, with accreditation to the UNO, in September 1945, he had already been immersed in the preliminary stages of taking up Iran's case against the Soviet Union at the recently constituted UN Security Council, on his own initiative, for he had not yet been instructed by Qavam to lodge a complaint formally.

Already, he was being endlessly interviewed by an increasingly sympathetic US press (most particularly by the influential James Reston of the NY Times), as he was endeavouring to win the support of President Truman, Jimmy Byrnes at the US State Department, as well as representatives of France, Britain, and other 'free' nations. At first, Ernie Bevin and UN Secretary Trygvie Lie were reluctant to alienate a recent ally and a prestigious permanent member of the Security Council, and they were agnostic about the chances of achieving redress for Iran through the UNO. Indeed, there is some evidence that Britain might even have been prepared to consider compromise with the USSR, leaving them free to exploit northern Iran, provided Britain's oil interests in the south were safe – echoes of 1907!

In his March 18th letter to the Security Council, Ala set out Iran's grievance, protesting against the presence of Soviet troops beyond the

March 2nd deadline in breach of the 1942 Tripartite Agreement, and the Tehran Conference Declaration in 1943, and accusing the USSR of gross interference in Iran's internal affairs, fostering insurrection and separatism, all of which constituted a threat to world peace and the security of all small, vulnerable nations of the world, in direct contravention of the principles of the UN Charter, to which the Soviets had subscribed. Like Taqizadeh before him, he nevertheless emphasised Iran's desire for friendly relations with her powerful neighbour.

In response, Gromyko once again raised the time-worn objections voiced by Vyshinsky in London, but in more cool and measured tones. However, he pretended that successful negotiations **were** taking place in Iran at that time, and requested a delay in discussions of the 'Iran Case' until April 10th. This was clearly calculated to buy time while Qavam was being 'tenderised' by Sadchikov.

Ala countered by stating that no such negotiations were taking place and that there was nothing to negotiate anyway, since the Soviets had clearly reneged on their commitments by outstaying the deadline of March 2nd. He added that this was a matter of great urgency, as the situation in Iran was deteriorating every day and threatening world peace.

Ala's problem was not confined to marshalling support for Iran among influential members of the US government or other members of the Security Council, nor was it merely facing down Gromyko and Lange, the sarcastic representative of Poland, now a USSR client state. A further difficulty was dealing with plots against him in Tehran, hatched mainly by the openly Russophile Deputy Prime Minister Mozzafar Firouz, who worked tirelessly to undermine Ala's position at the UN by issuing false press releases and deliberately distorting Qavam's instructions. But his main problem was coming to terms with the prevarications of his cousin, Prime Minister Qavam, and his contradictory instructions.

On March 27th, Gromyko once again insisted that agreement had been reached in Tehran and referred to a March 23rd Associated Press interview with Qavam, where the Prime Minister had ostensibly declared that he had no objection to deferral of Council discussions of the case to April 10th, or even later. The Soviet delegate persisted in claiming that there were differences between Qavam and Ala, who was exceeding his brief and misrepresenting his government's views ("..whom are we to believe, the Prime Minister or his so-called representative..?"). Gromyko then reiterated his request for a delay in discussions of the case, and refused to countenance allowing Ala to address the Security Council directly. However, James Byrnes, the US Secretary of State, who was present at the session, deplored Gromyko's

quoting an uncorroborated press report and provided evidence from the US Ambassador in Tehran that no agreement had been concluded with the USSR. He went on to correct Gromyko's misinterpretation of Qavam's interview. In effect, it was Qavam's Deputy and Press Officer, Mozaffar Firouz, who had deliberately altered the tenor of Qavam's remarks in translation. In the event, a majority of Council Members voted to turn down Gromyko's request.

At this dramatic juncture, Gromyko and the entire Soviet delegation walked out of the chamber in protest – a red-letter day for the assembled world press!

After many frustrating weeks of waiting in the wings, Hossein Ala was finally invited to take his place at the horse-shoe table at Hunter College in the Bronx, and was given the opportunity to present his case to the members of the Security Council at last!

On April 3rd Gromyko reported in writing that agreement had been reached with the Iranian authorities and that Soviet troops would be leaving Iranian soil within 6 weeks, *"provided that no unforeseen circumstances arise"*, adding that troop evacuation was entirely unrelated to the desire of the USSR for an oil concession and that there was no longer any need for retaining the 'Iran Case' on the SC Agenda.

The following day, Ala expressed his concern regarding Gromyko's caveat 'unforeseen circumstances', which he considered quite unacceptable. A further SC resolution proposed by the US was eventually adopted unanimously, supporting this view, and requiring both parties to report to the Security Council as to whether Soviet troops had actually evacuated *all* of Iran on May 6th.

In Tehran, on April 4th, Qavam signed an agreement with Ambassador Sadchikov for the formation of a 51%/49% joint-stock oil company, contingent upon future Majles approval. Gromyko immediately took advantage of the opportunity to assert that since complete agreement had been reached in Tehran, the proposed May 6th session should be cancelled, and the Iranian complaint permanently removed from the SC Agenda. Ala responded on April 9th that Iran's stance remained as previously reported, and formally requested that the Council remained 'seized' of the case. Worried about Qavam's repeated vacillations, Ala saw this as a key point, which would ensure continued UN SC support, even if Iran failed to prosecute its plea. In the opinion of Harold Minor, a US diplomat,¹ had it not been for Ala's personal initiative and his persistence at this crucial juncture, the Iran Case would almost certainly have been dropped from the Security Council's

¹ Bruce Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East*, Princetown University Press, 1949, p.340..

agenda.

As if to confirm his worst fears, on April 15th, in a further diametrically opposed letter, Ala reported that he had been instructed by the Prime Minister to withdraw the case from the agenda in the light of a complete Iranian accord with the Soviet Union. Gromyko triumphantly returned to the chamber having overcome his pique, claiming previous SC resolutions were invalid and reiterating his previous demands.

Much uncertainty and debate ensued: Can a government's request for removal of a complaint be valid when foreign forces are still in occupation? Once the Security Council has formally taken up a complaint, is it not the SC itself which must decide on retention or removal of an issue on the Agenda?

Trygvie Lie even expressed his anxiety lest the moral authority of the United Nations could be damaged by this seemingly insoluble conflict.

In the end, a majority of members voted in favour of the Security Council remaining 'seized' of the case, until it could be confirmed on May 6th that Soviet troops had completely left the country. Once again, Gromyko angrily vowed he would no longer take part in future discussions about Iran.

On the appointed day, however, Ala wrote that "most Soviet troops have apparently left the northern provinces, but since access has been denied to Iranian officials since 1945, it is impossible to be certain whether or not this is also true of Azarbaijan." Due to this incomplete report, the Council voted to defer the question till May 20th.

On May 20th, the Council received a first letter from Ala saying: "...I cannot ascertain complete Soviet departure; they continue to cause disorder, and Russian soldiers in civilian dress are arming separatists. The situation remains a threat to world peace."

On the same day, a further entirely contradictory letter was received from Ala with new instructions from Qavam, and a report stating: "...a commission to western Azarbaijan could find no trace of Soviet forces, which departed on May 6th". Agnostic members of the Security Council took this to be an indication of discord between Ala and the Prime Minister, probably caused by overwhelming Soviet pressure on the PM in Tehran. In Gromyko's sulky absence, it was Poland's Oskar Lange who aggressively cross-questioned Ala: "...if no Iranian officials had been able to get to Azarbaijan, how did they inspect the province – from the air, or through a telescope...?" Ala countered by saying that he knew nothing of microscopes or telescopes – all he was certain of was that Iranian officials, chosen by the Azarbaijan Democratic Republic, had been flown to selected areas of Azarbaijan in a Russian military plane. All these inconsistencies and contradictions caused much confusion and further anxiety among Security Council members.

Ala openly expressed his belief in the continued covert interference of Soviet agents in north-western Iran, and his doubts about the true intentions of his government to the media, attributing Qavam's astonishing volte-face to extreme pressure from Sadchikov in Tehran.

At this point, Prime Minister Qavam publicly reprimanded Ala for causing him embarrassment and exceeding his brief, instructing him to remain in Washington, and forbidding any further representations at the Security Council – an exceptionally humiliating experience for a senior diplomat! Indeed, only US Ambassador George Allen's intervention prevented his recall. At home in the Embassy, I well remember that my father told us we should be prepared to pack, as he anticipated being recalled for not following the Prime Minister's express instructions. He was meanwhile comprehensively vilified by Pravda as "the well-paid representative of Wall Street and the City of London".

The US diplomat Harold Minor (quoted by B. Kuniholm) dismissed rumours that Qavam had colluded with Ala in appearing to demand withdrawal of the case, while secretly instructing him to persist with his complaint at the Security Council, in order to assuage Soviet threats. He asserts that Ala had shown considerable courage in expressing his personal opinion without Qavam's sanction and in accepting the potential consequences of his action.

The Course of Events in Tehran

In fact, Soviet troops did leave Iranian soil on May 6th. There is an amusing, ironic anecdote from Robert Rossow, US Vice-Consul in Tabriz, who reported that as Russian tanks departed in clouds of diesel smoke, they suddenly ground to a halt after travelling for only a few kilometres – they had run out of fuel!! Anglo-Iranian Oil Company tankers had to be hastily rounded up to refuel Stalin's armoured vehicles, before the Soviets changed their mind!

Following the signature of the Qavam/Sadchikov agreement in April '46, the USSR waited impatiently for a 15th Majles to sanction the oil accord, which was beginning to take precedence over Azarbaijan autonomy in their mind. Meanwhile, the boldness, demands and influence of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic and Pishevari grew considerably, and Qavam's beleaguered government chose the path of conciliation and appeasement:

1. First of all, three Tudeh Party members were included in Qavam's cabinet;
2. On April 28th, Qavam held talks with Pishevari's "autonomous

government” in Tehran, to discuss the Azarbaijan Republic’s demands, and reach some compromise compatible with the Constitution.

3. On June 14th, Mozaffar Firouz signed a 10-point agreement with Pishevari in Tabriz (in the presence of the Soviet Consul!), where he conceded most of the Azarbaijan Republic’s requests. Firouz was also sent to assuage the demands of striking oil industry workers in Khuzestan, and to seek reconciliation with Qashgha’i and Bakhtiari tribal leaders in revolt.
4. Finally, Qavam held negotiations with Qazi Mohammad’s Kordestan autonomous republic, granting many of their demands.

Hitherto, the Shah had merely been a passive, but acutely anxious observer of his country’s deteriorating situation, and his all-powerful Prime Minister’s handling of these critical events. Now, in mid-October, he summoned Qavam to an audience, ordered the organisation of fresh parliamentary elections, and asked for Qavam’s resignation and the formation of a new cabinet free of Tudeh Party members, but above all, free of Mozaffar Firouz and his insidious influence. “Firouz must either face the Courts for treason or he must be exiled” he insisted. Although Qavam still astonishingly sought to defend his deputy, he eventually complied, and Firouz was appointed Iranian Ambassador to the USSR – “...they will treat him like a dog in Moscow...”, the Shah added.

Upon hearing of these decisions, Sadchikov hurried to Qavam’s office in protest, and threatened dire consequences for this “unfriendly act”. Qavam hesitated, fearing that Soviet troops might re-occupy Iran, but after consulting with George Allen, the new US Ambassador, the Shah adamantly insisted that his troops were immediately despatched north to Azarbaijan.

In October, the Shah issued his *Farman* calling for elections to the 15th Majles; Iranian armed forces commanded by General Razmara entered Zanjan on November 16th, and Tabriz on December 13th, meeting with little resistance, and to a tumultuous public welcome. Mianeh was also taken soon after, ending both the Independent Republics of Kordestan and Azarbaijan almost exactly 12 months after they were first formed. Qazi Mohammad was publicly hanged, and Pishevari escaped to Baku, having been cynically dropped “...for greater revolutionary reasons...”, as Stalin wrote to him.

The 15th Majles (carefully packed with members of Qavam’s newly created ‘Democratic Party’) overwhelmingly rejected the Qavam/Sadchikov oil agreement in October 1947, and Qavam was formally ‘forgiven’ for signing the agreement in contravention of Mossadegh’s Law. The United Nations Organisation was immensely strengthened by the peaceful resolution

of this first, highly significant case brought before the new-found Security Council. However, this also represented the start of a near half-century of Cold War, which persisted until the Soviet Union foundered, essentially for economic reasons, in 1991.

Qavam o-Saltaneh, ever an accomplished self-publicist, claimed a lion's share of the kudos for "hood-winking" or duping Marshall Stalin, and resolving the Azarbaijan crisis virtually single-handed, despite the manifest inclination for compromise and accommodation he had shown throughout his premiership; his vacillation and the repeated concessions he had granted this menacing neighbour for fear of reprisals. Indeed, to this day, he is credited with such masterful manipulation of events, that he alone achieved this diplomatic success, without due recognition of the immensely significant roles, the courage and perseverance of Ala and Taqizadeh in helping to change the world perception of Soviet post-war designs, and ensuring the sometimes reluctant support of the United States, the UN Security Council, Britain and other influential members of the international community.

After the resolution of this crisis, which had placed an immense strain upon his mental and physical resources, my father became feverish and lost weight, and he was found to be suffering from a recurrence of an old pulmonary tubercular lesion. Many years later, not long before he died in 1964, Ala was asked by an interviewer to describe what he considered to have been the most challenging and demanding episode in his entire 60 years of service to Iran. Without hesitation, Ala replied: '...representing my country at the Security Council in 1946, to prevent the dismemberment of Iran...'

It is still a mystery to me to know how and why such a patriotic, perceptive, crafty and experienced politician as Qavam o-Saltaneh, supported Mozaffar Firouz, and allowed him so much power and freedom to strive against the interests of his country, for so long. Even though Firouz had previously shown his allegiance to Britain as editor of Seyed Zia'adin's newspaper *Ra'ad*, his subsequent and unexpected Russophilia may have been motivated by a vengeful desire to destroy the Pahlavi dynasty, which had harmed his family in the past², even at the cost of Iran's integrity and sovereignty.

Why, despite its enormously dominant position and its success in creating a 'cordon sanitaire' of client states in Eastern Europe, the USSR abruptly decided to drop its ambitions in Iran, must await the full availability of the relevant Soviet Archives, which have only been partially opened so far. In his memoirs, written many years after the event, Truman claimed that he had issued an ultimatum, threatening the USSR with nuclear attack, and

² Mozaffar Firuz's father, Nosrat 0-Dowleh Firouz, was murdered in prison by order of Reza Shah in 1938.

that it was this which led to Stalin's 'climb-down'. There is no evidence, however, that he ever issued such a threat in any of the writings of his aides and contemporaries.

The Centenary of the Persia Society – Forerunner of the Iran Society.

By David Blow

The origins of the Persia Society, which was founded in 1911, go back to an earlier organization, called the Persia Committee, which was formed in October 1908. This was a pressure group set up in support of the Constitutional Revolution in Persia and in opposition to the policy of the British Liberal foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, of an entente with Tsarist Russia in Persia and Central Asia, where the two powers had long been rivals. Grey's aim was to secure Russia as an ally against the growing threat of Germany.

The entente with Russia found formal expression in the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, which covered Persia, Afghanistan and Tibet – the main areas of friction. In the case of Persia, the Convention divided the country into Russian and British spheres of influence, with a neutral zone between them. The Russian sphere was by far the largest, covering the entire north and centre of the country, while the British sphere was confined to a smaller area in the south-east, adjacent to what was then British India.

The Convention aroused widespread opposition among Persian nationalists and constitutionalists who feared it would leave them at the mercy of an aggressive, autocratic Russia and eventually lead to the partition of the country. The Persia Committee represented a significant body of opinion in Britain which shared this concern. It was founded by the distinguished scholar of Persian, Professor E.G.Browne, and the Liberal Imperialist Member of Parliament, H.F.B.Lynch, who had important business interests in southern Iran and Ottoman Iraq. Although the majority of its members were on the left of the political spectrum, there were also among its members Liberal Imperialists like Lynch, Liberal Unionists and one Conservative peer, Lord Lamington, a former Governor of Bombay.

The campaign by the Persia Committee was recognised at the time to have played a significant part in the victory of the constitutionalists in the summer of 1909 over the reactionary Mohammad Ali Shah, who received strong support from Russia, which sent its forces into northern Iran. Mohammad Ali was forced to abdicate in favour of his young son, Ahmad, and went into exile in Russia. Members of the Committee, however, were bewildered and divided by the bloody in-fighting that broke out among the constitutionalists once

they were in power. As a result, the Persia Committee became temporarily inactive, and it was against this background that the Committee's chairman, Lord Lamington, and the Persian Minister in London, Mirza Mehdi Khan Mushir ul-Mulk, conceived the idea of creating a new organization, to be called the Persia Society, which would adopt a different approach to arousing sympathy for Persia among the educated British public.

The main difference was that the new society was to be non-political, focusing instead on disseminating a knowledge of Persian history and culture. In fact, however, politics kept intruding, which was not surprising given that many of the initial members of the Persia Society had been active in the Persia Committee. This was the case, among others, with Lord Lamington, who became the first president of the Persia society, E.G.Browne, H.F.B.Lynch, the publisher T.Fisher Unwin and the prominent historian, G.M.Trevelyan. Lamington is said to have "proved highly receptive to political commentaries during the society's gatherings."³ Another difference with the Persia Committee was the inclusion of Persians, Indian Muslim nationalists and women among the membership.

The Persia Society began its activities in March 1911 and held an inaugural dinner on November 15 at the Savoy Hotel in London, attended by 180 guests, at which one of the principal speakers was that arch imperialist, Lord Curzon. Although Curzon had strongly opposed the Anglo-Russian Convention on the grounds that it conceded far too much to Russia and was highly critical of Grey's accommodating policy towards Russia, he had not joined the Persia Committee because, as a Conservative, he was unwilling to share a platform with left-wing Radicals and members of the new Labour Party, whose views on practically everything else he abhorred. For the same reason, he refused to join the Persia Society.

In his speech, Curzon strongly defended the independence of Persia, which was under renewed threat from Russia. In the summer of 1911 Mohammad Ali Shah invaded Iran from his exile in Russia in an unsuccessful attempt to recover his throne – something he could not have attempted without Russian support. Later in the year Russia issued a series of ultimatums to Persia backed by threats of military action over the activities of the American financial adviser to Persia, William Morgan Shuster, eventually forcing the termination of his mission. Russia was able to count throughout on the continuing complaisant attitude of Sir Edward Grey. For this he was denounced by both the Persia Committee and the Persia Society. .

The Persia Society held lectures on Persian culture and history, some of

3 Mansour Bonakdarian, *Britain and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911*, Syracuse University Press, 2006, p.360.

which were published, such as Curzon's lecture which was entitled *Persian Autonomy*, Sir Mortimer Durand's *The Charm of Persia*, E.G.Browne's *The Literature of Persia* and H.F.B.Lynch's *The Importance of Persia*.

The Persia Committee went out of existence with the outbreak of the First World War. The Persia Society, on the other hand, although it went into abeyance, was revived shortly before the end of the war by Lord Lamington, who in 1921 also launched a society journal, the *Persia Magazine*. The Persia Society continued in existence until 1929 when lack of interest on the part of the Persian Legation led to it being wound up and amalgamated with the Central Asian Society. It was reborn six years later, in 1935, as The Iran Society, largely at the instigation of the new Iranian Minister in London, Hussein Ala, the younger brother of Mirza Mehdi Khan, who had helped found the Persia Society, and with the encouragement of Lord Lamington, the former president of the Persia Society. Lamington became the first president of the Iran Society, with Hussein Ala as one of its two vice-presidents. Like its predecessor, The Iran Society declared its objective to be the promotion of understanding between the peoples of Iran and Great Britain by bringing together those interested in the culture and art of Iran. It also adopted the same non-political stance, which it has been rather more successful in adhering to. The society has flourished ever since.

Persian Autonomy.

Speech delivered by The Rt.hon. The Earl Curzon of Kedleston, G.C.M.G., G.C.I.E., P.C., at the Inaugural Dinner of the Persia Society at the Savoy Hotel, London, on 15th November, 1911.

Replying to the toast of “The Guests” proposed by the Right Honourable Syed Ameer Ali:

Earl Curzon of Kedleston said: I am particularly glad to reply to a toast which has been proposed by Mr.Ameer Ali. I had the honour of being a colleague of his for some years in India, and I share the gratification of his friends that since his return to this country he has been promoted to high judicial office – an office which he eminently adorns. He has on all suitable occasions shown himself a wise, moderate, and judicious exponent of the best Mussulman opinion of our day (cheers). It is many years since I made those journeys in Persia which eventuated in the book to which reference has been made. Twenty-two years ago in this very month I was in that country. For nearly a quarter of a century since I have been engaged in public life, both in India and here; but I can assure you that even at this distance of time every incident of my Persian travels – the long rides across the desert, the sight of the villages, cities, and towns, the memory of famous ruins, the relics of past civilizations, the interviews with notables and grandees, the glimpses I caught of the life of the people – all these things are so fresh in my mind that I can scarcely believe that they did not occur yesterday. I really believe that if I were told now to sit down and write afresh the record of my experiences in that visit, and I had to do so in a room without notes or books of reference, I could set down my impressions with an accuracy to which travellers seldom attain. But that was not my only experience of Persia. After spending three years in close company with Persian writers, historians, poets, artists, statesmen, and kings, while I was engaged upon my book, I became saturated and permeated with the influence of Persia. Although the occupations of my life have taken me far away since then, though I am now in the agreeable position of a politician out of office – a thing which I do not in the least deplore (laughter) – yet there still lingers in me the residue of that former influence. I am far from suggesting that my experience has been at all unique in this respect. My knowledge of Persia is not to be compared with that of many gentlemen sitting at these tables. But I believe there is no man who has been any length of time in Persia, whether as a traveller or explorer, as a diplomat, or Consul, or missionary, or merchant, upon whom the country does not leave an impression that time

does but accentuate rather than remove; none who can shake himself free of the fascination which it has laid upon him; none who is not ready to the best of his ability anywhere and in any capacity to render service to the country which has placed such a grip upon his imagination (cheers).

It is to the existence of a body of enthusiastic persons thus moved by Persia that this Society owes its origin. It is their object to emphasize the interest which acquaintance with Persia has created in them, and to create it in those in whom it does not already exist. One of the functions of the Society is to provoke sympathy with Persia. Sympathy offered by one nation to another is a gift which it is easy to deride. It is easily described as a cheap gift which involves no sacrifice to the donor and confers little benefit on the nation upon whom it is bestowed. This is a wholly erroneous view. Sympathy is the greatest gift short of material assistance (which may, in the circumstances, be impossible) that one nation can give to another. Sympathy means the effort and desire to understand another nation from that nation's point of view, to sympathize with its aspirations and ideals even when the horizon is most covered with clouds (cheers). It is a good thing that a society should exist capable of reminding this country that Persia has had a great and glorious past, that it has charmed humanity by the grace of its poets, by the beauty of its arts, by the teaching of its philosophers, that it has produced great statesmen and rulers, and that it is still capable, if favourable circumstances are guaranteed to it (loud cheers) of reproducing in the future some of those characteristics which have made it not merely romantic but famous in the past.

In one respect our interest in Persia is specially warm – that is in its survival as a nation (cheers). If there is one lesson which the contemplation of the history of Persia leaves in our minds it is the strong existence in olden as in modern times of a national spirit there. That spirit may have been crushed by long years of misgovernment; it may have been enslaved by the domination of an alien rule; it may even now be handicapped by the ignorance and inexperience of the people. It is, perhaps, somewhat incoherent in its expression and ineffective in its acts. But it is there. The great thing is that it is there, and that the best minds and thoughts in Persia are slowly working their way through all this welter of chaos and trouble towards the realisation of a national government, independent and autonomous (cheers). It may be said that the Parliament of Persia is inexperienced; that its statesmen are uninstructed; that the difficulties are overwhelming. All this to some extent is true, but I believe the people are loyal to the new regime, and I draw that inference from the resistance which they offered a short time ago to the effort to impose upon them the tyranny from which they had recently

emancipated themselves, and the comparative ease with which that attempt was defeated.⁴ If, as I hold, this national spirit exists in Persia it is for you and me as Englishmen to sympathise with and encourage it by every means in our power (loud applause).

In his excellent speech Professor Browne told us that this Society is non-political, and he alluded to his own experiences in Persia in skirting the edge of the Great Kavir. I am well aware that I am skirting the edge of a political Kavir (a laugh), but not being a member of the Society I am not bound by the prescriptions which I understand control and curb the orations to which we have so far listened. Being a politician, and moreover a politician out of office, I am at liberty to look at matters through political spectacles. I take it that your refusal to allow politics to intervene in your Society merely signifies that you are not going to identify yourselves in anything you say or do with one party as against another (hear, hear). But I venture to submit that it is perfectly childish to assemble 200 people here and ask them to consider the present position of Persia and then expect them to act and speak as if there was no political aspect to be dealt with, or problem to be solved (cheers). I desire to say nothing that may cause offence in the present situation, which I am quite aware is a troubled one. There is much insecurity in Persia, there is difficulty in collecting revenue, there is sporadic warfare between clans and tribes, and the rulers are unable in parts of the country to make their authority felt. But admitting all this, I want you to realise the extraordinary difficulties of the position in which the Persian Government has been placed (cheers). Look at what they have to do. After centuries of misrule (in many portions of the time it amounted to little less) the Persian Government decided without experience, almost without premeditation, to embark upon the great experiment of self-government by representative institutions. Parliamentary government, if I may use a medical metaphor, is a strong and heady physic in any country, even in Western countries, and it requires the sturdiest frame, the most robust constitution in order to assimilate it. Moreover it is apt in the process of assimilation, to cause, at any rate, minor disorders, which for a time produce a derangement of the system. Are you to believe that that which we with difficulty compassed after centuries of struggle an Oriental race, without experience, with traditions wholly different from our own, is successfully to achieve in five, ten, or twenty years? I feel most deeply for the position in which the Persian Government has been placed. In the first place they had to get rid of a *régime* of which they disapproved; then they had to create a Government themselves. It is not possible in a moment to train up statesmen for such a responsible task. No sooner are they launched

4 A reference to Muhammad Ali Shah's abortive attempt to recover his throne in July 1911.

on their way than they are plunged into civil war, and no sooner have they successfully escaped from civil war than, if what we read is correct, they are confronted with an ultimatum (cheers).⁵

I desire to say nothing whatever about the circumstances which have brought this state of affairs about. If I did so I should be trenching illegitimately upon the sphere of politics. It may very well be that the Persian statesmen in their handling of these affairs have not always been judicious or wise. They may have been over-sensitive or over-suspicious. But neither am I certain that the diplomacy of those powers with whom they have had to deal has been altogether wise. I am not clear that European diplomacy in connection with Persia in recent years has been a model of statesmanship (cheers). It may be that, not in one quarter alone, but in more than one, mistakes have been made.

No one realises more clearly than I do that it is for Persian statesmen and Persian Ministers to work out their own salvation. They know the circumstances of their own country, and they do not want gratuitous advice from us. Still I may be permitted to put myself in their place and to say that if I were a Persian statesmen – which in the present circumstances God forbid (laughter and hear, hear) – I would speak to myself in the following terms at the present juncture. “The first condition which my country wants is tranquillity and confidence.” Now that form of security can only be obtained by the possession by the Government of an organised and disciplined force, acting under the control of the Government, and capable of carrying out its orders. I would further say, “Such a state of affairs can only be secured with the aid of those who are competent and trained to discipline the force, and, still more, by the security of regular pay.” That brings us to the financial question, and for my part I witness with the warmest sympathy the efforts now being made by the Persian Government to reorganise their finances (cheers). Further, if I were the Persian statesman whom I have imagined I would not hesitate for a moment, if the present resources of my country were inadequate to obtain financial assistance, upon suitable conditions, elsewhere. I would not mind in the least going abroad for financial help, for guidance, for experience, for anything that might be useful for my country short of control. All that I would demand in pursuing this policy would be that any assistance I might receive should be absolutely disinterested in character, and that neither now nor in the future should it be directed in the smallest degree against the independence of my country (loud cheers). I believe that if Persian statesmen found it in their power after pursuing such a policy to present to the world what might be described, in another medical metaphor, as a clean bill of

⁵ A reference to a renewed Russian ultimatum to the Persian Government on November 11th over the actions of the American financial adviser and treasurer-general of Persia, W.Morgan Shuster.

health, within say two years from now, the sympathy not of ourselves only, who are old and traditional friends of Persia, but of the whole civilised world would rally to their aid, and nothing but the most hearty support would be received from those great Powers whose possessions are contiguous to those of Persia (cheers).

I cannot speak for the Government of this country, because I have no connection with it, and have no idea of what may be its views. But I have some right to speak for the average citizen of this country, and although he may not be very well informed about Persia, or other Oriental countries, he still has at the bottom of his heart a sincere and cordial sympathy with that race. On his behalf I wish to say that if it is anywhere stated – as I have sometimes seen it stated – that there is any hostility in this country to the regeneration of Persia, that we have the faintest interest in promoting or fomenting disorder with a view to extracting advantage from it ourselves, or that it is with the smallest pleasure that any British Government can contemplate the exercise of force for the protection of its own interests in that country, such is indeed a most misguided and mistaken belief (cheers). The British people and I think in this respect I can speak for the British Government as well, have only one interest in Persia at the present time, and that is the establishment there of a firm and respected Government responding to the national spirit of the people. The first British interest in Persia is a strong Persian Government. Even if you look at the matter from the narrow and selfish point of view it is so. For the safeguarding of our trade, for the protection of our subjects, for the peace of our borders, it is essential that there should be a strong Government at headquarters. And if this is necessary for us, how much more so for the Persians themselves, in order to provide a core and centre round which the best spirits of the country can gather, attracting to itself the finest intellects and most patriotic characters among the Persian people, and exhibiting a firm front to the outsider. Therefore, the constitution of a strong, united national Government in Persia is the one thing above all others that Englishmen desire (cheers).

There is one other respect in which Persia appeals to our sympathy. She is one of the few surviving Mahomedan countries which still retain an independent and autonomous existence (cheers). I should be sorry to see those countries stamped under foot. Though their faith is not our faith, yet with them we worship a single Deity, and we recognise that they pursue, and pursue with devotion, a noble and inspiring creed (cheers). The Mahomedan countries of the world are as much entitled as the Christian countries to the full benefits of the law of nations (cheers). With them equally with European people, treaties ought to be kept (loud cheers). We of all people in the world

ought to be most solicitous for the welfare of these countries, for is it not notorious that in India one of the main bases of the security of our rule lies in the loyalty and contentment of the Moslem population? (cheers). Just as in India (and Syed Ameer Ali will bear me out in this, as will Lord Lamington, who was a successful Governor in India) the Mahomedan population look with confidence for sympathy and support to the British Raj, so I would like Mussulman countries and Governments throughout the world to feel that in England they have their truest and most disinterested friend (loud cheers) – a friend who while making no encroachment upon their liberty, is prepared to lend every effort, and even to make sacrifices on their behalf. And among those Mussulman countries of which I am speaking, there is none to whom we ought to be more glad, if the opportunity presents itself to us, to be sympathetic and helpful than to Persia.

The Speakers of the Evening:

“His Majesty the King”: The President, Lord Lamington.

“His Majesty the Shah”: The President; reply by the Persian Minister, Mirza Mehdi Khan Mushir-ul-Mulk.

“The Persia Society”: Professor E.G.Browne; reply by the Chairman of Council, Sir Thomas Barclay.

“The Guests”: The Rt.Hon.Syed Ameer Ali, P.C.; reply by the Earl Curzon of Kedleston.

“The President”: Mr.H.F.B.Lynch.

The Persia Society,

Hon President: the Persian Minister Mirza Mehdi Khan Mushir-ul-Mulk

Hon.Vice-Presidents: The Councillor of Legation, Mirza Abdul Ghaffar Khan; the Consul General for Persia; the Persian Consul in London.

President: Lord Lamington.

Council.

The Hon. President and Hon. Vice-Presidents.

The President; Sir Thomas Barclay (Chairman); Syed Ameer Ali; Prof E.G.Browne; W.A Buchanan; General Sir T.E.Gordon; Sir C.J.Lyall; H.F.B.Lynch; Sir Frederick Pollock, Bart; Hon.Treasurer: Eric Macleod Mitchell; Hon.Secretary: Godfrey J.Hogg.

A PORTRAIT OF PRINCE MEHDI KHAN ALA AL-SALTANEH
by Mehdi Sam Ala



*Prince Mehdi Khan Ala al-Saltaneh
wearing his Knight Grand Cross of the Royal Victorian Order (GCVO).*

Mirza Mehdi Khan, Prince Ala al-Saltaneh,⁶ who played an important role in helping to create the Persia Society in 1911, spent the greater part of his diplomatic career and indeed his life outside Iran. Still very young, he arrived in London with his father and younger brothers in 1890, joined the Persian Legation in 1898 and succeeded his father as Persia's representative to the Court of St James' in 1907, which was quite unprecedented. That he did so, and remained as Persian envoy until 1920, is partly testament to his abilities and also to his character. Trained from a young age by his father, he became a seasoned diplomat, exercising caution and discretion; he worked hard, proving to be fastidious, and possessed exceptional manners. Significantly, he was in London at a time when Iran, positioned between the Russian and British empires, was concerned not to cause offence and Mehdi Khan clearly played his part in trying to keep the peace.

Mehdi Khan was from an old and prominent Azarbaijani family. His paternal grandfather, Mirza Ibrahim Khan (known as '*Mohandess-e Tabrizi*') was a graduate of the Military School in Tabriz set up by the French General, de Gardane⁷, and, initially, he was aide-de-campe ("*ajoudan bashi*") at Crown Prince Abbas Mirza's court in Tabriz.

After some time, Ibrahim Khan was posted to Baghdad as Consul-General where he met and became good friends with Majd ol-Mulk Sinaki⁸, renowned politician, philosopher and writer during Nasir al-Din Shah's reign. In time, Ibrahim Khan's only son, Mirza Mohammad Ali Khan (the first Ala al-Saltaneh) would marry Majd ol-Mulk's second eldest daughter, Homa Khanoum (later titled Azemat Dowleh).

Early in his career, Mohammad Ali Khan served as Consul-General in Bombay and Baghdad, and as Deputy Governor-General in Gilan. Mehdi Khan - the eldest of Mohammad Ali Khan and Khanoum Azemat Dowleh's four sons - and his two younger brothers, Mohammad Khan and Hussein Khan, were born in Tehran and the family home was in the Pamenaar precinct, adjacent to the Shams ol-Emareh building in the Golestan Palace

6 Mirza Mehdi Khan held the title Mushir ul-Mulk from 1909 to 1918. In 1918, after the death of Mehdi Khan's father, Ahmad Shah bestowed on him the titles Ala al-Saltaneh, Amir Touman.

7 Napoleon I's special envoy who was sent to Iran following the Treaty of Finkelstein to help organise Iranian military capabilities with the purpose of regaining land lost to Imperial Russia in previous wars. In November 1808, de Gardane sent engineer Captain Armand-Francois Lamy to establish the first European style military-engineering school in Tabriz where he taught fortification rules, topographic drafts and the French language to some of Persia's young elite. See Irene Natchkebia, *Journal of the International Qajar Studies Association* (2007).

8 Nephew to Agha Khan Noori, Sadr-e Azam during Nasir al-Din Shah's reign.

compound. The children were tutored at home, learning English and French from a young age. Shortly after 1882, Mohammad Ali Khan (now titled Moin ol-Vezareh) was appointed Consul-General in Tbilisi and he moved his family there, with the children continuing their education at home. It was here that the fourth and youngest son, Mirza Jamshid Khan, was born. In the late summer of 1889, Nasir al-Din Shah came to stay at Mohammad Ali Khan's residence; the Shah was returning home from his second State visit to England (his third European trip) and he stopped over in Tbilisi where he was entertained by Mohammad Ali Khan, with the three eldest sons greeting the Shah in different languages.

By December 1889, the Shah had dismissed Mirza Malkum Khan, Persian Minister in London since 1873, and replaced him with Mohammad Ali Khan, having been impressed by the man and his hospitality while staying over in Tbilisi. Mohammad Ali Khan was given the title 'Ala al-Saltaneh' and was instructed to make his way to London. However, whilst it was decided to take the three eldest sons to London to further their education, Khanoum Azemat Dowleh, of her own choosing, decided to return to Iran with the youngest son, Jamshid Khan.

On arrival in London, Mohammad Ali Khan, Ala al-Saltaneh, Amir Touman (Military General), presented his credentials to Queen Victoria as the new Persian envoy and the Persian Legation settled down in Portland Place. Mehdi Khan was enrolled at University College School, which at the time was based in Gower Street. Records⁹ show that in October 1895, he was elected to be a Monitor at the School, and in that same month he gave a talk on '*Some Persian Customs*' to members of the 'School Scientific Society'. In 1896, he is listed as Sub-Curator of the 'Scientific Society' and Assistant Secretary of the 'School Debating Society'. Prior to leaving the School, his name appears on the 'Committee of the School Reading Room' in April 1897. Meanwhile his two brothers, Mohammad Khan and Hussein Khan, were sent to Westminster School.¹⁰ At the Persian Legation, Mohammad Ali Khan enlisted the services of Madame de la Valle, a French governess, to assist his sons excel in their extra curricula studies and activities. The affection in which she was held by the children was demonstrated by the way they would collect funds between themselves every Christmas and send them to Madame de la Valle long after

9 University College School archives.

10 Mohammad Khan went on to study medicine at University College London and on qualifying he practised in addition to serving as the Persian Legation's Medical Officer from 1905 – 1920; he returned to Iran in 1920 as one of the country's first specialists in pulmonary diseases. One of his earliest patients was Reza Shah. For Hussein Khan, see paragraph 10 of this paper.

she had left their service. After Mehdi Khan finished his studies at University College School in 1897, he joined the Persian Legation in 1898 as Secretary and continued in this role until he became First Secretary 1905-1907. In 1901, at the same time as working at the Legation, Mehdi Khan embarked on further studies and he applied to study for the Bar at the Inner Temple, being admitted to the Inn on 13 November and continuing his legal education there until 26 January 1905 when he was called to the Bar¹¹. In 1906, Mehdi Khan's father returned to Iran and was appointed Foreign Minister. Between 1907-8, Mehdi Khan served as *Chargé d'Affaires*, 1909-1911 as Minister Resident (he was given the title 'Moshir ol-Mulk') and from 1911 until his retirement in 1920 he was Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary. From 1918 onwards, he became Prince Mehdi Khan, Ala al-Saltaneh, Amir Tuman, titles bestowed on him by Ahmad Shah after Mohammad Ali Khan died in June 1918.¹² In 1919, Mehdi Khan was decorated with the Knight Grand Cross of the Royal Victorian Order (GCVO), an order exclusively in the gift of the British monarch.

The period in which Mehdi Khan served as Persian Minister in London, 1907-1920, covers a wide range of historic events and developments and, as such, a full discussion of his role in these years remains a task for the future. However, it is possible to touch on certain events here. One which owed much to his encouragement was the founding in 1911 of the Persia Society, which helped to promote a better understanding of Persia at a time when its newly established constitutional government was still insecure and vulnerable to pressure from Tsarist Russia, which the British Liberal government was all too inclined to acquiesce in. On a less serious level, Mehdi Khan witnessed the constant concern of Britain and Russia, the two Great Powers exercising influence in Persia, not to be outdone by one another even in matters of protocol. Early in 1914 the question arose of what gift to give Soltan Ahmad Shah on his Coronation, which was to take place in July of that year. In February 1914, no sooner had Mehdi Khan formally written to the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey to "inform your Excellency that the Coronation of His Imperial Majesty the Shah will take place...on 21 July 1914...and that on that date His Imperial Majesty will take up the reins of Government" than officials within the British Foreign Office began a lengthy process of choosing an appropriate gift for the Shah. Mehdi Khan would only learn of their decision in June, for Britain and Russia were both anticipating

11 Inner Temple archives.

12 Mozaffar al-Din Shah bestowed the title 'Prince Ala al-Saltaneh' on Mohammad Ali Khan after his State visit to England in 1902.

one another's decision on this, with the British initially suspecting that the Russian Emperor would give the Shah some kind of decoration while the Russians felt that "the former [Russian Order of St André] should not be conferred unless the King [George V] confers the Garter"!

As the months went by without any final decision, other European nations – the French, Austrians, Belgians – one by one made enquiries of the British Foreign Office as to what gift Britain intended to make, with the Germans "anxious to follow the same procedure as that adopted by Russia and Britain". In the end, the Tsar decided against a decoration and presented the Shah with a "portrait [of the Tsar] set in brilliants" and the British followed suit by presenting a "gold plate" from King George V.¹³

In early 1919, a Persian delegation, led by the Iranian Foreign Minister, Moshaver al- Mamalek, arrived in Paris seeking admission to the Paris Peace Conference.¹⁴ At Moshaver's behest, over the following months Mehdi Khan made several attempts to secure a meeting between the Iranian Foreign Minister and Lord Curzon in London as Moshaver hoped to obtain British support for Iran to be represented at the Conference. It was not the first time Mehdi Khan found himself pressured by Iranian officials only to be met by firm British resistance. Curzon, who at this time was hurriedly negotiating the Anglo-Persian Agreement, declined every request for a meeting and pointed out in his conversations with Mehdi Khan that Britain could not assist Iran while she was pursuing independently in Paris a policy wider than that which the British government could support and while Iran was making overtures to other powers: "...the Persian Government could not expect to ride two horses with success, whether they were in London or Paris or the British Government and foreign Governments" (alluding to the fact that the Iranians had made overtures to the French and US governments). He was most willing to see Moshaver and to have the frankest and friendliest of conversations, but such a meeting could only take place, Curzon informed Mehdi Khan, if the Iranian delegation relinquished its appeal to the Conference and "regarded the matter as one for settlement between Persia and Great Britain".¹⁵ While Mehdi Khan was going back and forth (at times visiting Paris to explain the situation to Moshaver), in April 1919 the Iranian government officially expressed its disapproval of the actions of Moshaver and announced it did not wish to present claims to the Conference. Despite this, Moshaver persisted

13 Public Record Office, FO 371 series.

14 Mehdi Khan's brother, Hussein Khan, was deputy to Moshaver in the Persian delegation.

15 Public Record Office, FO 371 series.

but ultimately did not get to London to meet Curzon.¹⁶

Mehdi Khan experienced more success with the British Foreign Office later in the autumn of 1919 when he played a significant role in making preparations for Ahmad Shah's state visit to Britain and, in particular, in relation to where the Shah was to be lodged during his stay. On learning about British plans to have the Shah stay at Lansdowne House during his visit, Mehdi Khan repeatedly expressed his concern to British officials regarding this matter, requesting that the Shah stay in accommodation befitting his status. He also reminded them that the Shah's great-grandfather, Nasir al-Din Shah, and his grandfather, Mozaffar al-Din Shah, had been respectfully received at Buckingham Palace and Marlborough House respectively. After several meetings and exchange of correspondence, Mehdi Khan's persistence paid off and British officials relented, allowing the Shah to be welcomed at Buckingham Palace.¹⁷

From documents held in public and private archives, it is possible to get a good sense of Mehdi Khan's life as a diplomat and to learn something of his character. In terms of the diplomatic business at hand, there were, in characteristic diplomatic fashion, ongoing visits between Mehdi Khan and the British Foreign Office to express and exchange opinions on events and developments of the day, and sometimes these meetings would take place over luncheon. Inevitably, there was much communicating of information with a continuous exchange of correspondence expressing British and Iranian views on matters; in this respect, Mehdi Khan showed himself to be meticulous when it came to his correspondence in that he and his staff were dedicated drafters. Apart from correspondence with the British and Iranian Foreign Offices, Mehdi Khan received letters and telegrams from far and wide, from locations as varied as Vienna, Moscow, Monaco, New York, Paris, Turkey and Switzerland; the writers ranging from Qajar princes to low-ranking officials, some making requests for funds or loans from the Imperial Bank of Persia or similar institutions and others simply relaying political and commercial news concerning the location from which they were writing. Notably, during World War I, Mehdi Khan himself often wrote to the British Foreign Office and other institutions requesting loans for the Persian government. On the

16 The British managed to stall a visit by Moshaver until August 1919 by which time the Peace Conference had concluded; once the British signalled their readiness to receive Moshaver, he was on his way to greet Ahmad Shah in Constantinople where he would learn that he was to be removed as Foreign Minister and appointed Persian Minister in Constantinople instead!

17 Public Record Office, FO 371 series; also see Dr Javad Sheikholeslam, *Asnad Va Mahramane Vezarate Khareje Britania*.

social front, he attended diplomatic receptions and hosted dinners for visiting Persian dignitaries.

It is worth making an observation concerning Mehdi Khan and the Iranian political environment of his time, specifically in relation to the ruling class with which he was interacting.¹⁸ He was closely related to many of the individuals conducting the affairs of state through his maternal grandfather, Majd ol-Mulk. Vossough al-Dowleh, a first cousin, served as Foreign Minister and later as Prime Minister in the late Qajar period (when the Anglo-Persian Agreement was being finalised, he was one of the famous 'Triumvirate' who were helping Curzon in his quest); Qavam al-Saltaneh (Vossough's younger brother) served as Minister and Prime Minister during the late Qajar and Pahlavi eras. Ali Amini, Mehdi Khan's second cousin, served as Minister and later as Prime Minister in the Pahlavi era. Mehdi Khan's father, Mohammad Ali Khan, on his return to Iran was appointed Foreign Minister in 1906 and Prime Minister in 1914 and again in 1918 shortly before to his death. Mehdi Khan's younger brother, Hussein Ala, served for many years in a post similar to Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs in the late Qajar period and under the Pahlavis as Ambassador to London, Paris and Washington, followed by appointments as Prime Minister and Minister of Court.

At the beginning of 1920, Mehdi Khan, beset by ill-health, decided to leave London and travelled to Switzerland for treatment, his intention being that once fully recovered, he would return to his post. However, once in Switzerland he learned that the treatment and recuperation would take longer than anticipated and by the late summer of 1920, he decided to retire from his post¹⁹, causing Britain's Foreign Office to note: "It is much to be regretted that Ala es-Saltaneh, G.C.V.O., is not likely to recover sufficiently to return to his post in London. He is still in Switzerland undergoing treatment..."²⁰ He based himself in Grisons but often travelled throughout Switzerland and to neighbouring countries such as France and Italy. It was while he was in Switzerland that he met and married a Russian lady by the name of Tatiana de

18 Only a few of Mehdi Khan's relations are mentioned here.

19 After Mehdi Khan's departure, British and Iranian officials considered two new candidates for the post of Persian Minister in London. One candidate was Hussein Khan, who despite being described by the British as having "...played a prominent part in Persian affairs for some years...his intelligence and great bility...undoubted", was overlooked in view of his "advanced nationalist tendencies...it would be better that he should go to Madrid [as Persian Minister]" And he did. Nevertheless, Hussein Khan was appointed Ambassador to London in the 1930s and was one of the key individuals behind the revival in 1935 of the old Persia Society, when it was renamed the Iran Society.

20 A sentiment expressed by different officials; Public Record Office, FO 371 series.

Katchaloff who, with members of her family, had fled the Russian Revolution of 1917. She became Princess Ala al-Saltaneh on her marriage and also took on the Persian name of 'Fatemeh'. Mehdi Khan would remain in Switzerland for a further seven years and despite having retired from the Iranian Foreign Service, individuals of all types would continue to write to him during his time there. Typically, correspondence would be sent to the Persian Legation in London and was then forwarded on to him in Grisons; writers would range from individuals asking for various favours to those providing news of developments in Iran and other countries.

After some forty years away from Iran, Mehdi Khan returned to Tehran in 1927 with his wife Tatiana Khanoum. His long period of absence did not deter him from easily settling back into a Persian way of life. They lived in his house in the 'Park-e Ala al- Saltaneh' compound, comprising several homes built for Mohammad Ali Khan, Khanoum Azemat Dowleh, their four sons and their families. Mehdi Khan also had his house in Dezashib village, in Shemiran, set in the foothills of the Alborz Mountains, next to his father's summer residence. Even though Mehdi Khan's marriage to Tatiana Khanoum was not to last, the early years were happy ones. She had started to learn Farsi prior to coming to Iran and they regularly entertained friends and relatives.

In retirement, Mehdi Khan wrote a diary, recording his observations and thoughts on a daily basis, a practice he continued until his death in 1937; he subscribed to various periodicals and publications, kept himself abreast of international affairs and would meet with friends who were prominent personalities, writers and literary figures of the day. After Tatiana Khanoum returned to Europe, he continued to entertain and there were regular visits from nephews and nieces (Mohammad Khan and Hussein Khan's children), frequent walks along the leafy streets of downtown Tehran with Mohammad Khan's loyal dog, Fidel, who would often refuse to leave Mehdi Khan's home when Mohammad Khan and his family came over for dinner.

In his last years, he focused on philanthropic activities. One such project was the school he started in the village of Dezashib. He founded a school by donating a few rooms in his garden in Dezashib to be used as classrooms. Later, with the assistance of his friend Rezazadeh Shafagh, eminent historian and man of letters, and the Ministry of Education, a school for some thirty students was established when they bought a house which had an attractive courtyard, and a head teacher was appointed. Mehdi Khan personally funded the salaries, payments for books and writing materials. Students from this school later gained entrance to universities qualifying as lawyers, doctors and engineers. Doctors, after qualifying, often returned to the village and set up practice. He also left necessary funds to Mohammad Khan's wife Roghieh,

Fakhr-e Iran, to continue the running of the school, which she did for some years after his death. In the early 1950s, the administration of the school was handed over to the Ministry of Education in an official ceremony attended by Mohammad Ala and Hussein Ala, the two surviving brothers of Mehdi Khan, and it was named 'Nicki-e Ala School' ('Benevolence of Ala School'). The school is still standing today in what is known as the Dezashib area, but it was renamed in the late Pahlavi era, thereby undermining the benevolent gesture of the family.

It is no exaggeration to say that Mehdi Khan was highly admired and respected by both British and Iranian officials who were interacting with him on a regular basis during his tenure as Iranian envoy in London. To the Iranians, he was a man of influence, derived from his posting and privileged standing amongst the Iranian ruling class of his time; to the British, he was a man of integrity, principled and reliable, who operated at a level of professionalism familiar to the British Foreign Office; he was not controversial or as colourful as some of his contemporaries. Both sides saw him as capable of helping keep Anglo-Persian relations on a secure footing and his achievement was that he did so over fifteen years, remaining in his post despite the multitude of events in those years, the frequent rise and fall of Iranian governments and the reign of three Qajar Shahs. It is difficult to gain a good understanding of his character in those years when he was bound by duty and formalities. However, on his return to Tehran the private individual is revealed through his diaries and correspondence. Here, Mehdi Khan emerges as a private man in a Persian environment set against the backdrop of changes taking place under the newly crowned Reza Shah.

[The writer, a great nephew, is editing the diaries of Mehdi Khan. He would like to express his thanks to the following individuals for their help: Dr Parviz Ala, Dr John Gurney, Mr Michael Joyce, and Ms Celia Pilkington.]

Peter Cole's Account of his Visit to Tajikistan in 2010.

The Iran Society's Travel Grant enabled me to spend 5 weeks in Tajikistan from 28th August to 4th October. For the majority of this time I lived in Dushanbe, studying Farsi both with private Iranian teachers and at the Iranian Cultural Centre. I was thereby able to meet many students from Iran who were studying for PhDs in Tajikistan. I also took music classes at the Dushanbe Conservatory, studying Tajik music with teachers who had been trained in Moscow and were engaged in promoting and performing Tajiki national music, and attended several cultural events at the Bactria Cultural Centre.

I had the opportunity to travel outside the capital, although a security incident involving the escape of several Islamist prisoners meant that travel to the east of the country was severely restricted, and it was logistically not feasible to travel to the Pamirs during the time I was there. I travelled instead to the Fan mountain range in the northwest of the country. The highlight of this trip was a trip to Makshevat, near the lake Iskander Gul, where at glacier level a mummified corpse called 'Khoja Ishok' has survived in a cave which is rumoured to be that of Spitamenes, an Alexandrian general. Over time a pilgrimage tradition has grown up around the mummy which has survived the coming of Shia Islam and still exists today. I was able to take this pilgrimage myself, which involved a punishing four hour uphill hike through the Makshevat gorge followed by a nerve-wracking climb, in bare feet, across a boulder and then a sheer wall with small toe- and footholds (I estimated the climb to be around a 5c in European grading terms, but the lack of safety equipment made the going significantly harder). Access to the cave itself involved a rope climb. Once at the cave we were compelled to observe local traditions of behaviour, including the removal of any 'modern' items such as glasses and watches. An imam who functioned as caretaker of the cave and nearby mosque offered a Qur'anic reading followed by prayers in Tajik for the safety and prosperity of the attendant pilgrims.

In Dushanbe I was much struck by the fragility of society there. I heard first hand accounts of how the civil war of 1994 shaped the lives of Tajiks even down to today, and how families and traditional tribal structures are threatened by the migration of labour out of Tajikistan and into Moscow. With institutions weak and helplessly corrupt (I observed for example the impunity with which police were able to extort money from drivers which was far more blatant than in any other country I have travelled in), there is little trust in people's ability to work or save for a better tomorrow.

This affects people's life and work choices, with employment by foreign institutions and/or remittances from abroad being a far more preferred source of income for those with few government or criminal connections. I also learnt about how Tajikistan perceives its status within the Persian-speaking world and how other Persian-speakers perceive it.

Steven Styer's Account of his Visit to Iran in Autumn 2010.

My stay was just under the month offered on my visa. It's worth noting that getting the visas was a great challenge, the embassy timings in London not matching website, etc. My time was split between Persian language lessons and philosophy lessons which involved some Persian.

The teacher of Persian was the head of his department at the Centre for the Great Encyclopedia of Islam and he took his position after the late Professor Zarin Kub, who was famous even outside of Iran. He had previously lectured at Oxford and took £25 for lessons, and seems (on talking to others) to never take less than £20 or £22.50. He knows tutorial prices from his experience.

He taught me the whole of the grammar, some of which was a review, but he has an excellent method by which one may identify all the parts of the sentence. This experience with him was priceless for other reasons. He wished to show the vast resources for research which Iran has to offer. He showed myself and another Oxford student how to search for manuscripts in Iran's libraries and helped us use the library at the GIE Centre. The only time I left Tehran was with him to visit an academic in Qum who published manuscripts, etc., and to visit the Mar'ashi Manuscript Library, which was very impressive.

Throughout the trip, opportunities opened up, in part, I believe, because the student I was with and myself had Oxford ID cards. People gave us the help and attention we needed.

The first week took time to make appointments, so I studied with the student I mentioned, taking the grammar he was being taught. We tried to speak Persian at all times and to speak in our encounters with Iranians during our movements. From then on, I worked all day long, every day except for when I was bookshopping to stock a library in case I am not able to return to Iran (though I very much hope to in Spring).

Time was split between the Anjuman al Hikmat, the Iranian Centre for the Study of Philosophy, which used to be related to the French Institute for Persian studies. The head of the centre, Dr Ahwani, spent much time teaching me and helped me meet other experts at the centre.

At the end, I was able to speak comfortably (though sometimes slowly) in Persian and to read with a dictionary which I set as my number one priority goal. This was great to achieve. Also, I made contact with this beautiful country and had many great experiences there and made many contacts. I brought back a library so that I can continue to use Persian as a research language and for edification through its rich literature. I brought back CD's of poetry recitation and traditional singing, etc.

Regarding my research, Dr Awani was a great help. I discovered the primary source of the ideas in the main text I wish to study, the *Ma'arij al Quds*. It turns out that my target author, al-Ghazali, was using the science of his day and now I know what books he was using to derive that science. I am now going through his scientific works and looking at how he challenged the orthodoxy of his day and managed, with a careful hand, to get them to accept a much more sophisticated view than was originally held. The main source was the Persian physician and philosopher, Avicenna, who changed the course of philosophy by reconciling and taking the best of the science of his day. He combined the best of Galen's medicine and psychology, Aristotle's cosmology and psychology and Ptolemy's cosmology to explain how the world worked in a more precise and powerful way than any predecessor and most of Medieval Europe followed his findings, which were undeniable. Ghazali in turn popularized many of these views and challenged the religious establishment who eventually accepted most of his positions.

I am sincerely grateful for the opportunity which I could not have afforded. It may sound a cliché, but it is absolutely true. I returned inspired and felt a let-down upon returning to Oxford. That really says something about Iran. I am aware of the challenges that Iran faces, but there is much there that is great and unique.

Soldiers, Shahs and Subalterns in Iran: Opposition, Protest and Revolt, 1921-1941: Stephanie Cronin, Palgrave MacMillan, 2011, 332pp, Hb ISBN 978-0-230-53794-1

Reviewed by James Buchan

Iran is a country not just of roses and nightingales, but of insurrection. The modern history of the country is punctuated by riot. Riot over bread and meat. Riot over opium, tobacco and petroleum. Riot over Jews, Bahais and Anglican missionaries, headgear, military conscription, pay, extraterritoriality, the harem, tribal disarmament, Constitutional government, even liberty.

In this admirable book, which is full of new information, Stephanie Cronin, a scholar at Oxford University, examines certain instances of popular protest under Reza Shah Pahlavi (*reg.* 1925-1941). She links those episodes to a tradition of protest stretching back to the agitation against a foreign tobacco monopoly in 1891-92 and forward to the Revolution of 1979 and the June Days of 2009.

Under the Qajars, who could muster neither police nor much by way of army, Iranian protest had a theatrical character, and a wide repertoire. The guilds would strike, the bazars close, and merchants and craftsmen migrate in a body to the mosque. There would be petitions, telegrams and the menacing flyers known as *shabnamehs*. Men took *bast* or asylum in shrines, the royal kitchens and stables, foreign legations and telegraph offices, and the Majles. When all that failed, there was riot and (though Cronin does not mention it) assassination.

Cronin traces these practices back to the opposition to the Tobacco *Ré gie* granted to a foreign syndicate in 1890. In fact, such tactics were deployed in bread riots in Tehran in the late 1850s, in the massacre of the Russian mission in Tehran in 1829 and, *mutatis mutandis*, in the Safavid era. Street protest fascinated and terrified the foreign envoys and consular officers so that, even for the period when much of Iran was illiterate, there is quite enough for the documentary historian to read.

Cronin selects seven instances of protest under Reza. They are: the Gendarmerie regime under Col. Mohammed Taqi Pesyan in Mashhad in the summer and autumn of 1921; the eleven-day “Soviet” of Major Abdulqasim Lahuti in Tabriz the following January; the agitation in Parliament and outside it against Reza’s project for a Republic in early 1924; protests in the provinces against military conscription, dress reform and tribal settlement in 1927-29; the first strike among the Iranian workers at the Abadan refinery in May, 1929; and the Jahansuz “conspiracy” of conscript officers in 1939. All

the chapters, even the last where the evidence is exiguous, are learned and fascinating.

In those protests, Cronin sees an enraged “subalternity.” This word, which originated with Gramsci and became current in Indian history-writing about forty years ago, Cronin uses to describe such groups as the poor, the lower clergy and bazar, the workers in the oilfields and small civil servants. It is, perhaps, not an ideal description of Colonel Pesyan and Major Lahuti. For some reason, Cronin chooses not to write about the Jangali revolt in Gilan of 1920-21, which was more threatening and more long-lasting than the Mashhad and Tabriz regimes. It would have made a nice central panel of a rebellious triptych, with Pesyan and Lahuti the wings.

The Jahansuz conspiracy is too mysterious to tell us much about the subaltern army ranks in Reza’s last years in power, and may have had little reality outside Reza’s suspicious mind. What is clear is that Iran did not incubate in its pre-war army the type of nationalist officer that, in 1952 and 1958, overthrew the Egyptian and Iraqi monarchies. Rather, the bulk of the army rallied round the Pahlavis against Mohammed Mossadeq in 1953.

Subalternity is better applied to the clergy. The senior *mujtaheds*, notably Haeri Yazdi, thought it more important to protect the infant seminary at Qom than to fight Reza. It was the rural mollahs, itinerant sermonisers, pious storytellers (*rowzehkhan*s) and darvishes that rebelled at Reza’s military conscription and dress reforms. After all, they were the intended victims. As one of his prime ministers wrote, Reza thought clerical garb was just a cloak for idleness and beggary.

It was a travelling preacher from Sabzevar, Mohammed Taqi Bohlul, a man of little learning but prodigious memory, who led the *bast* against the European hat in the Gowharshad mosque at Mashhad in the summer of 1935. Likewise in 1963 and 1977 it was the lower-ranking clergy, not the venerable Golpayegani, Shariatmadari and Marashi-Najafi of the Qom seminary, who answered Khomeini’s call to insurrection.

The massacre of the *bastis* in the Gowharshad in July 1935, which seemed at the time to sound the death knell for the traditional Iranian protest in the age of the machine-gun, did nothing of the sort. In 1963, the bazaar and seminary students took on well-armed police and military forces and, in the Revolution of 1979, destroyed their morale. As Cronin says in her account of the Abadan strike, the Iranian traditions of protest “were plastic and malleable, remarkably adept at responding to new conditions, and able to act as vehicles for demands and programmes which might be defensive or revolutionary.”

Cronin is particularly interested in the role of women in protest. As

passive subjects, women and girls are the *namus* (“chastity”) that, along with *jan* (“life”) and *mal* (“property”), are under threat from foreigners or royal despotism. As active participants, most notably in the bread riots of the nineteenth century and at Abadan, women send the regime a message of great rhetorical force: Your tyranny has passed all bounds for only *in extremis* would we abandon our modesty and leave our houses. Women’s protest has also adjusted to new conditions, while retaining its power to shock. The death by shooting on June 20, 2009 of Neda Agha Soltan caused the Islamic Republic more injury than any other event of that evil summer.

If the book has a small fault, it is the fault of almost all writing about Iran, in Persian and English, which is vehemence. Cronin devotes several pages to erecting flimsy rhetorical targets, or Aunt Sallies, on which she lands some devastating blows. Does any impartial reader still believe that the “Riza Shah decades...were dominated by the overwhelming power of a modernizing authoritarian state, where opposition, when it could be detected at all, was backward-looking, marginal and easily suppressed”? Is Reza’s army really “contextualised as a monolithic bastion of the monarchy”?

On the contrary, both Reza and Mohammed Reza used to complain that foreigners were only interested in the opposition to the rule. Spokesmen for the Islamic Republic have made the same complaint.

Drinking Arak off an Ayatollah's Beard: A journey through the inside-out world of Iran and Afghanistan: Nicholas Jubber, Da Capo Press 2010 Pb 327pp illustr. ISBN 9 780306 818844 £9.99.

Reviewed by Antony Wynn.

This is the best sort of travel book, written by a student of Persian who spent some months living with a family in Tehran and then travelled through the rest of *Iran-Zamin* in Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan, not just wandering, but with a plausible purpose: the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi. Having a purpose is the proper way to travel and to explain one's presence to the people one meets, for nobody appreciates the idle looker-on. With his knowledge of Persian, Jubber was able to make the people he met – and indeed lived with – the centre of his narrative.

His theme is Iranian nationalism and the importance today of the *Shahnameh* as the expression of that nationalism, not just in Iran, but also in the wider Persian-speaking world. The 60,000 couplet epic, completed a thousand years ago, tells the story of the Iranian nation from the beginning of myth to the Arab invasion of AD 636, which led to the near destruction of Persian culture and national identity. Although not taught in schools to the extent that it used to be, its stories are still branded on the hearts of all Persian speakers.

Jubber's book is about the power of poetry over the Persian mind. His interest in the *Shahnameh* opens many doors for him. A student friend, attracted by his genuine interest in Iranian culture, plucks him out of a crowded university dormitory and insists that he install himself with his own family. The father is an intellectual lover of poetry and arak and the son's friends are rappers but, in contrast to the rappers of Brixton, their words come from the *Shahnameh*, much to Jubber's surprise. The sultry daughter of the family is a member of a theatre group, and plays the part of Shirin in a story that originated in the *Shahnameh*. A friend takes Jubber downtown to the *zurkhaneh* traditional gymnasium, where the drummer chants verses from the epic. Siyavash, the mythical persecuted hero, is transmogrified seamlessly into the martyred Imam Hossein as he chants, ancient Persia eliding into Shii Islam. Ferdowsi's nationalism is everywhere: inescapable, ineradicable.

The point that Jubber is making here is that one should not assume that the *Shahnameh* is just the property of the intellectual, secular nationalists of north Tehran, but that it has just as much appeal to the religious bazaar people of south Tehran, who are as patriotic and nationalistic as anyone else. He meets a young man who, during the war with Iraq, used to chant heroic verses from the epic before an attack, to give courage to his comrades, most

of whom, although barely literate, knew the stories well. The galvanising effect of the poetry on the young soldiers was like that of a bagpiper on a Highland regiment – and equally terrifying to the enemy.

Poetry in Iran is not only for the educated élite, but also for the people. Taxi drivers stuck in traffic calm themselves with a verse of Hafez; Jubber's landlady recites Farrokhzad while hanging out the laundry; he hears poetry in grocers' shops, in the bathhouse, in student dormitories. He realises that Iran is not about nuclear headlines, but about a butcher reciting the *Shahnameh* in his shop while his customers crowd round to listen, not caring if they have to wait for their meat.

In his travels across Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan Jubber mixes easily with everyone he encounters. They are mostly free spirits, frustrated anarchists, sentimentalists and dreamers, but warm and friendly. They respond to his desire to reach dangerous Ghazni, the home of Ferdowsi's penny-pinching patron, and escort him all the way, through Taliban road blocks, determined that no harm should come to him.

Jubber's cast is made up not of government officials or clerics, but of bruised but unbowed ordinary people, whose Persian spirit is kept alive by the flame of poetry, that soft answer that turneth away wrath. Where else can a bitter family quarrel be settled by an apposite verse quoted by a benevolent mediator? It is important to understand this aspect of the Persian character, and Jubber has touched the heart of the matter in a lively and readable way.

Zoroastrianism: An Introduction.

Jenny Rose, I.B.Tauris, 2011, 303 pp. Pb: ISBN 978 1 84885 088 0, £14.99.

The Hymns of Zoroaster: A New Translation of the Most Ancient Sacred Texts of Iran.

M.L.West, I.B.Tauris, 2010, 182 pp. Pb: ISBN 978 1 84885 505 2, £14.99.

Reviewed by David Blow

These are two important books which should help greatly towards a better understanding of Zoroastrianism, the small number of whose adherents today belies its immense influence in shaping religious ideas. Zoroastrianism is a monotheistic religion with a strong element of dualism. Established by the Iranian prophet Zoroaster, or Zarathushtra to give him his original Iranian name, at some point between 1200 and 560 BCE, it postulates a single divine creator, Ahura Mazda, who has brought into being a world of perfect order and goodness. This perfection, however, has been lost through the actions of a hostile spirit, known as Angra Mainyu, who, like Ahura Mazda, has always existed, and has introduced moral and material evil into the world. Ahura Mazda is engaged in a struggle with this force of evil to restore creation to its original perfection. In a striking emphasis on free will, Zoroastrianism requires human beings to decide which side they are on, urging them to choose goodness and contribute to its ultimate victory over evil by living according to Zoroaster's ethical code of 'good thoughts, good words, and good deeds', and by performing the necessary prayers and rituals. The central cult objects are fire and water, but above all fire which, as Jenny Rose explains in her absorbing introduction to the religion, "functions....to cross the space between the human and divine spheres".

Zoroastrianism is arguably more successful than other monotheistic religions in reconciling the belief in a single and wholly good divine creator with the existence of evil and suffering in the world. At the end of time, the Kingdom of God will be re-established in the world he has created, which was once perfect and will be so again. Growth and increase and fertility are all essential to help bring this about, which is why Zoroastrians abhorred the asceticism preached by the Manichees and many early Christians. It was a religious duty for Zoroastrians to cultivate the land so that it brings forth plenty, and this was reflected in the parks or 'paradises' that so impressed

the Ancient Greeks. They were also enjoined to care for the natural elements of earth and fresh water which support life, protecting them from pollution. Hence the practice of exposing the dead for their flesh to be eaten by birds of prey and wild animals, rather than burying them and polluting the earth.

Zoroastrianism was the official religion of the three great Ancient Iranian empires – the Achaemenid, Parthian and Sasanian – although not to the exclusion of other religions. But the Arab Muslim conquest of Iran in the mid-7th century CE delivered it a fatal blow from which it never recovered. The total number of its adherents today is estimated by M.L. West at no more than about 130,000. The majority of these are in western India, in the state of Gujarat and the city of Mumbai, with the next largest communities in Zoroastrianism's original homeland of Iran, where the main centres have long been the central cities of Yazd and Kerman.

During its heyday, Zoroastrianism exercised a strong influence on Judaism, and through Judaism on Christianity and Islam. Such crucial concepts as the judgement of the individual soul after death, heaven and hell, a physical resurrection in which the soul is reunited with the body, and a Last Judgement are all now recognized as being derived from Zoroastrianism. As Jenny Rose makes clear, Zoroastrianism was able to influence Judaism as a result of the generally friendly contacts that existed between Jews and Iranians for most of the ancient period after Cyrus the Great freed the Jews from captivity in Babylon in 539 BCE and encouraged them to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. A sizeable Jewish community also remained in Mesopotamia, close to the centre of Iranian imperial power, especially under the Parthians and Sasanians, both of whom had their capital at Ctesiphon on the Tigris.

Scholarly disagreements are rife in Zoroastrian studies, where so much remains uncertain. West and Rose are more or less agreed on the meaning of the name Zarathushtra, which West translates as 'old-camel man' and Jenny Rose as 'owner of old camels'. They also agree that Zoroastrianism was the religion of the Achaemenid kings from Darius I (522-486 BCE) onwards, which some scholars dispute, and West thinks that both Darius's father and his paternal grandfather may have been Zoroastrians. But along with the rest of the scholarly community, they are thoroughly divided over when Zoroaster is likely to have lived. The Old Avestan language of the Gathas has much in common with the Sanskrit of the Rigveda, the sacred Hindu hymns which are generally dated to the second half of the Second Millennium BCE. On these linguistic grounds Jenny Rose follows the late Professor Mary Boyce in arguing that Zoroaster must have lived at some time during this period, while the Iranian tribes were still tending their herds on the southern steppes of Central Asia and had yet to migrate onto the Iranian plateau. For West,

this linguistic argument “is not at all reliable”. In his view, it is not at all impossible that the archaic language of the Gathas was still in use much later and he finds it “unlikely that Zoroaster should be separated from the rest of Iranian history by such a wide time gap”.

The whole corpus of Zoroastrian texts, which were composed at different times, is known as the *Avesta*. M.L. West has produced a new translation of the oldest and the most important of these, which are the five *Gathas* and the *Liturgy in Seven Chapters*. The *Gathas*, which were composed by Zoroaster himself, are described by West as a collection of seventeen ‘hymns’ which Zoroaster “sang or recited at gatherings of his family and/or followers, and in which he voiced his devotional and other aspirations”. Many are addressed to Ahura Mazda, whose name is often rendered as “the Wise Lord”, but which West translates as “the Mindful Lord”. The *Liturgy in Seven Chapters*, was composed, in West’s view, shortly after the prophet’s death for use in an act of worship. He points out that it integrates “some aspects of popular religion”, such as the worship of the earth and the waters, into the Zoroastrian cult.

These texts, together with a couple of prayers, are the only examples of Old Avestan, which is the oldest known Iranian language and one which belonged to eastern Iran. They were transmitted orally over many centuries, before being finally written down during the Sasanian period (224-651 CE). This was a complicated process, as the Pahlavi or Middle Persian of the Sasanians was a language of south-western Iran, and the number of characters in the Pahlavi alphabet, as West explains, had to be more than doubled, to a total of 53, “in order to reflect meticulously every distinct phonetic nuance that was audible in the oral recitations by the priests”. A further problem was that the priests no longer pronounced the texts as they would have done in Zoroaster’s day. West provides a splendid illustration of what this meant: “It is as if the *Canterbury Tales* had been transmitted by purely oral means down to the 20th century, the Middle English grammar and vocabulary being faithfully preserved but the pronunciation having evolved into something like a modern London accent, and the text so recited had then been recorded in the International Phonetic Alphabet.” In view of this, what is especially astonishing, as West says, “is the extraordinary fidelity with which, to all appearances, the original text was transmitted.”

It is hard to imagine more difficult texts than these to translate, where the meaning of some words remains quite unknown and the grammar is frequently ambiguous. In the circumstances, West has produced a translation that is remarkably clear and is much assisted by the paraphrase he provides on the facing page. He admits, however, that given the many obscurities and possible alternative interpretations, “any translation of the Gathas necessarily

has a provisional character”.

Rose’s survey of the history of Zoroastrianism covers an enormous amount of ground for a book of average length, beginning in the second half of the second millennium BCE, when Rose believes Zoroaster lived, and ending with Nietzsche’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra* in the 19th Century. On the way she includes a most informative chapter on the Zoroastrians of Central Asia in Sasanian times (though not under Sasanian rule), when Sogdian merchants took the religion to northern China. She herself is descended from the Iranian Zoroastrians who migrated to India some time between the 8th and 10th centuries CE, where they became known as Parsis (‘Persians’). She describes how they adapted their religious practice to a Hindu and Muslim environment and how they prospered during the period of British rule in India. Her chapter on the Parsis is enlivened by the occasional family anecdote, including a vivid and stomach-churning description of how one of her great-uncles was set upon by robbers and fatally stabbed with a poisoned curved dagger while guarding one of the trains running to and from the British military outpost in Rawalpindi.

Rose lends support to the current trend of finding the Parthian period much more important than previously thought, with Zoroastrianism far from dormant as Sasanid propaganda had long led us to believe. She also shows that Zoroastrian practice was by no means uniform throughout the Iranian lands. Funerary practices varied and a syncretic form of Zoroastrianism grew up in Central Asia, where Sogdian Zoroastrians lived alongside Manichaeans, Nestorian Christians and Buddhists. Mourning of the dead, which was frowned upon by ‘orthodox’ Zoroastrians in the west of Iran, was the norm in Central Asia where it took an extreme form. Mourners there would weep, beat their chest and head, pull out their hair and tear their garments. Centuries later Iranian Shi’a, as Rose points out, would mourn the martyrdom of Imam Husayn on Ashura in similar fashion.

The subject of Shi’i mourning rituals produces one of Rose’s fascinating cultural links with Zoroastrianism. She finds a Zoroastrian precedent for the Shi’i *ta’ziyeh* play which enacts the historical events of Ashura in a Parthian heroic text which was written down in the Sasanian period and is called the *Ayadgar-i Zareran* (‘The Memorial of Zarer’). This tells of the treacherous slaying of Zarer, who was the general of Zoroaster’s royal patron, Vishtaspa, and “includes a moving threnody by Zarer’s young son, Bastur, as he stands by the battered, lifeless body of his father”. “The recitation of this text”, writes Rose, “seems to have functioned as a cathartic act of devotion for Zoroastrians, just as the later *ta’ziyeh* eulogies served for Shi’ites.”

Rose has much to say on the possible influence of Zoroastrianism on the

philosophers of Ancient Greece. One such she draws attention to is Heraclitus of Ephesus, with his focus on fire, his view of death as polluting and his concept of a cosmic struggle operating in all things and events. Another is Plato. Rose observes that some of Plato's myths on "the concept of the soul wandering through the afterlife" resonate closely with Zoroastrian ideas and notes the suggestion "that Plato may have encountered similar myths of Iranian origin, perhaps through Pythagoreans in Sicily". She also writes that "Given Aristotle's awareness of the two principles (of good and evil) of the Persians, his placement of Zoroaster as living 6,000 years before the death of Plato could be understood as suggesting that the Platonic pursuit of the good is somehow related to an antecedent Persian ethic".

Following on from the Ancient Greeks, Europeans have continued to be fascinated by Zoroaster and have constantly reinvented him in the light of their own preoccupations – from a Renaissance man, to a prophet of the Enlightenment, to a Nietzschean *übermensch*. Voltaire's famous comment remains as true as ever : 'On parle beaucoup de Zoroastre et on en parlera encore.'

