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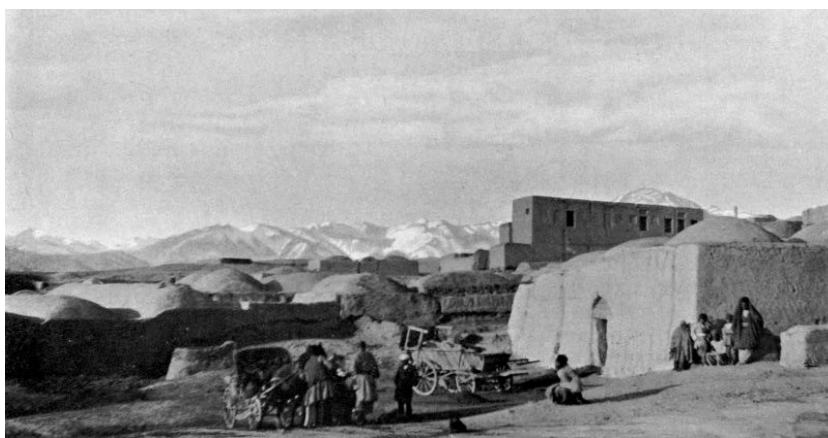
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**“A Land of Dust and Stones”: British Travellers to Iran
1890s-1920s**

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“It would seem, however, that Persia is a country made for wandering onward; there is so much room, and no boundaries anywhere, and time is marked only by the sun. Nor is it only in the open country that one wanders, but in the bazaars too [...]”

Vita Sackville-West, *Passenger to Teheran*, p.91.

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Introduction

From the beginning of the nineteenth century until the first decades of the twentieth, Great Britain was characterized by a wave of social, economic and political frenzy, which contributed to its hegemonic imperialistic role in the world's scene.¹ This rapid expansion obviously resulted in an increase of British contacts with other territories, either political powers, such as Russia or France, or countries which were under the influence of the British Empire.² Consequently, these increasingly close connections, together with nineteenth-century transport innovations, enlarged the number of people travelling to more or less far-away countries for diplomatic and political reasons, or just for cultural interests and pleasure.³ Eastern countries were a particularly beaten destination, especially India, which was a colony of great importance for the British, and the territories to the west of the Indian border, which were strategically significant as defensive buffers for India.⁴ Besides these political motives, British travellers were also fascinated by the culture of these Oriental countries, in particular Middle Eastern countries such as Turkey, Iran and Arabia, which, in the British mind, were associated with stereotypes derived from the *Arabian Nights*.⁵

In this dissertation, I aim at providing an overview of the intertwining of political, cultural and Orientalist motives in British travel and travel writing in the Middle East between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, focussing on a country that, more than others, was at the centre of this phenomenon, that is to say Iran, or Persia, as it was called at that time. In the first chapter, I deal with the main features of nineteenth- and twentieth-century British travel and travel writing. Firstly, I consider the innovations which changed the British way of travelling and the significance of the Middle East as a destination for travellers.

¹ T. Youngs, *Travel Writing in the Nineteenth Century: Filling the Blank Spaces*, London, Anthem Press, 2006, pp.7-8.

² *Ibid.*

³ D. Wright, *The English amongst the Persians: during the Qajar Period*, Heinemann, 1977, p.149.

⁴ G. Nash, "Politics, Aesthetics and Quest in British Travel Writing in the Middle East" in Youngs, *op.cit.*, p.60.

⁵ G. Guadalupi, *Orienti. Viaggiatori scrittori dell'Ottocento*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1989, p.8.

Secondly, I take into account how British travel writing developed in the nineteenth century and how it was imbued with Orientalist attitudes when referred to the Middle East. In the second chapter, I focus on Persia and its controversial connections with the British Empire. Firstly, I deal with the main events that characterised Anglo-Persian political relations between the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, emphasizing British interference into Persian affairs in this crucial period, which saw the passage from the ancient Qajar dynasty to the newly born Pahlavi dynasty. Secondly, I take into account the travel books of some of the most significant British travellers who visited Persia in the nineteenth century and became landmarks for the following travellers, that is to say James Morier, James Fraser, Henry Rawlinson, Henry Layard, Edward Browne and Lord Curzon. Through the experience of these travellers it is possible to detect some of the main features that characterized nineteenth- and twentieth-century British travel writing in Persia, such as the importance of nature, exoticism and cultural clash.

These two first chapters function as a background for the third, and last, chapter, where I focus on British travellers who visited Persia between the 1890s and the 1920s, and on the analysis of their travel books, on the purpose of retracing the aforementioned characteristics or other recurrent topics as well as unconventional perspectives. As has been explained, the nineteenth century was characterized by increasingly considerable connections between Iran and the British Empire, which persisted, despite some interruptions due to temporary hostilities,⁶ until the first decades of the twentieth century, and became gradually more complicated. At the time, Persia maintained political relations with other foreign powers, particularly Russia and France, but Great Britain managed to become the most influential one, organizing an extensive network of socio-political interventions that ranged from the establishment of innovative devices, like the electric telegraph, to the intensification

⁶ G.N. Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question*, London, Longmans, Green & Co., 1892, vol.1, p.7.

of diplomatic action.⁷ The period between the 1890s and the 1920s was particularly intense, since it was characterized by an increasing British influence into Persian affairs and by crucial events, such as a mass demonstration in 1890, a revolution in 1906 and a coup in 1921, which transformed Persia and progressively restructured its relations with the British Empire.⁸ Therefore, it is interesting to examine this decisive period through the words of British travellers, in order to realize how Persia changed, but, most of all, how British travellers' gaze on Persia and their way of travelling developed over these decades between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth.

The third chapter is divided into four sections according to two principles. First of all, it is chronologically structured, in order to portray how travel and travellers changed along the decades between the 1890s and the 1920s, in reference to travellers' attitudes, means of transport, tracks, and Persian society. Secondly, I attempt to provide an overview of the different types of British citizens who travelled to Iran at the time, in relation to their reason to leave. In the first section I deal with the travel book of a British woman who travelled to Persia in the 1890s for pleasure, curiosity and personal interests, that is to say Gertrude Bell's *Persian Pictures*. In the second section I take into account the writings of the eminent diplomat Percy Molesworth Sykes, who stayed in Persia between the 1890s and the 1910s for professional reasons, but also shows a sheer interest in the culture of this country in his works. The third section is focussed on Mrs Hume-Griffith's travel book *Behind the Veil in Persia and Turkish Arabia*, which relates the time she spent in Persia with her husband, who was a doctor in a medical mission from 1900 to 1903, and recounts his medical experiences in some chapters of his wife's travel book. Although Mrs Hume-Griffith was not directly involved in the work of medical missions, she frequently deals with her husband's activities

⁷ *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.607.

⁸ H. Katouzian, *The Persians: Ancient, Medieval and Modern Iran*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2009, pp.162-99, *passim*.

and her gaze is clearly influenced by the medical and evangelical motives which brought him there. Therefore, her accounts together with her husband's testimony give me the opportunity of investigating into the activities of two important categories of travellers who had been increasingly numerous in Persia since the beginning of the nineteenth century, that is to say doctors and missionaries. The fourth section is about the wives of ministers or diplomats in Persia, focussing on Vita Sackville-West's *Passenger to Teheran* and *Twelve Days in Persia*. Moreover, her letters from Persia to Virginia Woolf are a further interesting source of information about her travels in Persia. Besides being a famous writer and intellectual, Vita Sackville-West was the wife of Harold Nicolson, who worked as a diplomat in Teheran in the 1920s.

Finally, I would like to explain how I have dealt with some critical points concerning terminology and Persian orthography. As far as terminology is concerned, the main problem is represented by the use of the terms "Iran" and "Persia". They have always been used indifferently, although "Persia" was the most widespread, until Shah Reza Pahlavi proclaimed "Iran" the official name of the country in 1935.⁹ The nineteenth- and twentieth-century travellers that are examined in this dissertation nearly always refer to this country as Persia, which is why I use "Persia" more than "Iran", even if today only the latter should be employed. In my dissertation, I usually use "Persia" in reference to nineteenth- and twentieth-century issues and to the travel books with which I deal, while I employ the name "Iran" when I consider general aspects of this country. Regarding orthography, although Persian presents grammatical and lexical dissimilarities from Arabic because of their different origins, it uses the Arabic script,¹⁰ which explains the fact that in the travel books I have analysed there are frequently several orthographical varieties in the Latin script for the same Persian word. The names of geographical places are particularly useful to illustrate this phenomenon.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.217.

¹⁰ S. Williams, *Iran*, London, Kuperard, 2010, p.153.

For instance, in Ella Sykes's travel book, *Through Persia on a Side-Saddle*, the capital of Persia is referred to as "Tehran", while Vita Sackville-West always writes "Teheran" in *Passenger to Teheran*. Another example is found in Mrs Bishop's *Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan*, where the author writes the name of the nearest Turkish city to the Persian border as "Khannakin", while Sackville-West uses the word "Khaniquin". As far as my dissertation is concerned, I have decided to adopt a uniform way of writing the most common toponyms or other types of usual Persian words, according to the forms which are mostly used today and those I have found on the critical works I have studied. In contrast, regarding unusual words or less-known names of places, I have conformed to the varieties I have found in each travel book.

1. British travellers and travel writing between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

1a. Innovations, expansion and the Middle East

Travel is determined by a series of social, cultural, political and even economic elements affecting any kind of written account which may result from it. Carl Thompson's definition of travel as a “negotiation between self and other that is brought about by movement in space” may help to detect these elements involved in a travel experience.¹ The first factor is certainly the “self”, that is the individual who goes on a journey and undertakes a displacement from his or her social context. Travellers' reason to leave, their own culture, sex, class and personality are all aspects which deeply influence the travel experience. The second factor involved in travelling is the “other”, which refers to the place visited by the traveller and, consequently, to its culture and humanity. The fact that travel is defined as a “negotiation” between these two factors points out that there are still two elements to consider, that is to say the relation between travellers' original place and their destination in terms of similarities and differences and the historical time when this negotiation takes place. These last points are specifically significant when individuals travel to a country with which their home country maintains complicated and controversial relations. This obviously involves political and social issues which may affect travellers' attitude towards the host country and influence their stay.

All these factors gain special value when they are placed in a specific temporal and spatial frame, that is Great Britain between the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. First of all, technological and transport innovations as well as British imperialistic expansion deeply affected travel from the nineteenth century onwards.² Railways, photography and, especially in early twentieth century, cars, “changed people's

¹ C. Thompson, *Travel Writing*, Oxford, Routledge, 2011, p.9.

² Youngs, *op.cit.*, pp.7-8.

relationship with and perceptions of the world”.³ Trains and cars facilitated mobility, so that far away places could be reached in a shorter time. Furthermore, Tim Youngs points out the fact that British expansion and hegemony resulted in an increasing amount of travellers who journeyed across the Empire for a wide range of reasons, either political or scientific or just for pleasure.⁴ This factor, combined with the increased easiness of travelling due to the new means of transport, brought to an unprecedented number of people travelling around the world and the consequent commercialization of travel, that is tourism. As a matter of fact, the distinction between traveller and tourist becomes crucial in the nineteenth century, as James Buzard highlights.⁵ Tourists, who rely on planned itineraries, look at the places which they visit through the filter of their own stereotypes and habits, while travellers look for acculturation and authenticity.⁶ Therefore, tourists “seek a more leisured version of what was left behind”, while travellers “thrive on the alien, the unexpected, even the uncomfortable and challenging”.⁷ The increasing number of tourists resulted in the desire on the part of travellers to avoid them and travel to unspoilt and unconventional places. Under this longing for wilderness lie other reasons, among which the most significant is British, and Western, travellers' necessity to escape their modern industrial world and strict Victorian morality.⁸

In this context, the East certainly provided satisfaction to British travellers' desires. According to Geoffrey Nash,

the East not only supplied an authenticity of being which the ever more urbanized nineteenth century lacked, it was a destination whose allure resided in its capacity to satisfy Westerners' search after some kind of original. Conscious of their cultural strength Westerners nevertheless sought replacements for the lacks in their material culture.⁹

³ *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁵ J. Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature and the Ways of "Culture", 1800-1910*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, pp.1-6, *passim*.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ M. Cocker, *Loneliness and Time: British Travel Writing in the Twentieth Century*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1992, p.2.

⁸ Thompson, *op.cit.*, p.54.

⁹ Nash, *op.cit.*, p.56.

At that time, the terms “East” and “Orient” usually referred to the Islamic world, particularly to the area which was later named “Middle East”. As a matter of fact, “Middle East” is a neologism created in an Anglo-Saxon context at the beginning of the twentieth century in reference to the region between the Near East, which defined the Mediterranean area, and a farther East, which mainly indicated India, a crucial region for the British Empire.¹⁰ At that time the Middle East consisted of Persia and the Ottoman Empire, which was constituted by historically significant countries like Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine.¹¹ The culture and history of this region as well as its controversial political and religious relations to Western countries throughout the centuries easily clarify the reason why in the Western conscience this specific area was identified with the term “East”, “replicating images of the West's “other” which characterized European discourses on the East”.¹² Furthermore, the Middle East is the cradle of Christian religion and culture, but it is also the territory of the Arabs and Islam, which have always been at the same time threatening and fascinating for the Christian world. What the diplomat and traveller Lord Curzon defines as “the wonderful and incalculable fascination of the East”,¹³ which had transformed the East into a sort of exotic myth based on the *Arabian Nights*, had already characterized eighteenth-century Western literature and culture.¹⁴ However, in the nineteenth century transport innovations and the British intense and controversial political relations with Eastern countries pushed a huge number of travellers to see this myth with their own eyes.

¹⁰ P. Hulme, T. Youngs, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p.105.

¹¹ S. Searight, *The British in the Middle East*, London, East-West Publications, 1979, p.3.

¹² Hulme, Youngs, *op.cit.*, p.105.

¹³ Curzon, *op.cit.*, vol.1, p.12.

¹⁴ Guadalupi, *op.cit.*, p.8.

1b. Travelogues, Orientalism and Persia

These elements which characterize travel must be taken into account when dealing with travel writing, which is the “record or product of this encounter” between self and other.¹ As far as form is concerned, written material about an individual's travels presents itself in shape of letters, journals, articles, travelogues, which highlight the hybridity of this genre. However, from the nineteenth century the “modern or literary travel book”² or travelogue is clearly the most popular and employed type of publication about travels, characterized by a retrospective first-person narrative in prose sometimes including maps, illustrations or photographs.³ Nevertheless, focussing on the British context which is the object of this dissertation, travelogues themselves changed throughout the Victorian Age. As a matter of fact, at first they were substantially informative and objective, because their aim was to provide news and details which could be useful for other travellers who would embark on the same journey.⁴ However, from the second half of the nineteenth century, the birth of mass tourism and the consequent publication of a wide range of guidebooks with information and planned itineraries resulted in a gradual predominance of a more subjective and creative attitude in travelogues as opposed to the informative perspective.⁵ As Mark Cocker points out,

they [i.e. the Victorians] had so thoroughly completed their geographical surveys that the regions on which one might have reported entirely new information were simply running out. [...] the focus ceased to be the novelty of the data, and became the manner of its presentation. [...] Authors have felt at liberty to reorder the sequence of their travel experiences, or to interpret events in the loosest and most imaginative fashion, or to substitute a deeply personal enquiry for the conventionally random stream of external facts.⁶

Therefore, late nineteenth-century travel books are more focussed on the way travellers look at the foreign place they visit and on their mutual interaction. This monopoly of subjectivity

¹ Thompson, *op.cit.*, p.10.

² *Ibid.*, p.19.

³ *Ibid.*, p.14.

⁴ Cocker, *op.cit.*, pp.5-6.

⁵ Youngs, *op.cit.*, pp.6-7.

⁶ Cocker, *op.cit.*, pp.7-8.

caused a gradual reduction of the border between fiction and reality in travel literature, a trend which continued throughout the twentieth century. Travellers consciously began to conceive of their travel books as a literary product which had to stimulate readers' fascination by the way they told their adventures rather than by the subject matter itself, which they tried to transcend.⁷ This shift from an objective to a prominently subjective perspective and the gradual approach of travel writing to fiction will be testified by the travel books which will be subsequently examined in this dissertation.

With regards to the Middle East, it has already been stated that it represents a peculiar case in the history of British travel and, consequently, travel writing. According to G. Nash "aesthetic and political motifs figure prominently in nineteenth-century travel writing in the Middle East" combined with "religious concerns, the search for the exotic, and an urge to escape Western modernity".⁸ On the one hand, "aesthetic motifs" and exoticism are linked to the aforementioned Western vision of the East as a place of wonders, wilderness and unbound passions which could satisfy what was missing in their own world. On the other hand, "political motifs" reflect the close political relations between Western countries, particularly the British Empire, and the Middle Eastern world, which became increasingly controversial throughout the nineteenth up to the twentieth centuries. Furthermore, aesthetic and political issues are not separate from each other when dealing with East-West relations. As a matter of fact, as Edward Said points out, the hegemonic attitude of Western countries towards Eastern countries resulted in a distorted and stereotyped vision of the East as "a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe",⁹ which was endowed with the exotic features which have been previously described. Said, whose theories are mainly concerned with a Middle Eastern context, uses the term "Orientalism" to define the Western approach to the Orient, "which

⁷ M.H. Braaksma, *Travel and Literature: an Attempt at a Literary Appreciation of English Travel-Books about Persia, from the Middle-Ages to the Present Day*, Groningen, J.B. Walters, 1938, p.6.

⁸ Nash, *op.cit.*, p.57.

⁹ E. Said, *Orientalism*, London, Penguin Books, 1979, p.63.

was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences”¹⁰ and stereotyped images, like “the Oriental despot, [...] the religiously fanatic Muslim, the lascivious Oriental female”.¹¹ Gianni Guadalupi claims that the Middle East, with its multifaceted fascinating history, was transformed into a sort of funfair,

una sorta di Disneyland composta da vari reparti all'insegna dell'Olimpo, della Croce e della Mezzaluna, che venivano a formare tutti insieme un Paradiso del Turista tale da soddisfare ogni esigenza del colto e dell'inclita, del pio e dell'empio [...].¹²

This East-West dialectic, which is conventional in itself, and the stereotyped image of the East involved frequent generalizations, which tended to treat the immense land to the East of Europe as a uniform and compact territory, without considering the fact that it consists of distinct countries with different peculiarities. Therefore, in many travel books about Persia, for example, there are observations like “The East is full of secrets”,¹³ “the East is the birthplace of wonders”¹⁴ or “I cannot think of the east as gaudy, but always as brown”.¹⁵ These remarks may certainly be true as far as Iran is concerned, but betray a generalized view of the East as a homogenous counterpart of the modern West mainly coinciding with the Islamic area. Despite these generalizations, Iran, or Persia, represented a special case for British travellers between the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. As M.H. Braaksma highlights, Persia was the catalyst of a multiplicity of interests on the part of the British,

diplomatic as the buffer-state between India and Russia; romantic as the scene of many stories of the Arabian Nights [...]; commercial because its soil yields oil and other minerals [...]; archaeological as one of the oldest empires of world-history; missionary as one of the most fanatical

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.1.

¹¹ Hulme, Youngs, *op.cit.*, p.107.

¹² Guadalupi, *op.cit.*, p.7.

¹³ G.L. Bell, *Persian Pictures*, London, Anthem Press, 1894, 2005, p.13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.54.

¹⁵ V. Sackville-West, *Passenger to Teheran*, London, Tauris Parke Paperback, 1926, 2007, p.93.

Muhammedan countries in the world, religious as the birthplace of innumerable sects.¹⁶

This complex mixture of political, geographical and cultural reasons clearly emphasizes the importance of Persia for the British in that crucial period and, consequently, deserves a deeper insight.

¹⁶ Braaksma, *op.cit.*, p.10.

2. Persia and the British Empire: politics and travel

2a. Nineteenth and twentieth centuries: relations between Great Britain and Persia

It has been previously stated that British travellers between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries looked for cultural genuineness and primeval environment which could supply what they lacked in their modern industrial world. Furthermore, G. Nash claims that, particularly in the Middle East, these desires were intertwined with strong political motives, which were the consequence of British increasing commercial and imperialistic expansion.¹ These political implications not only resulted in a heavy presence of British diplomats and consuls in Middle Eastern countries, but they also distorted common British travellers' attitude towards these countries. Therefore, Nash affirms that

the aesthetic response to the primitive “Other” would increasingly be transposed into the political realm, requiring an urge to establish a connection between the civilized, most “advanced” portion of humanity, and cousins who as yet abided in conditions of backwardness [...] At the same time, however, these were connected to the European past with all it implied for visions of lost innocence. Empire was thus ineluctable, desirable, and presented opportunities for joining modern European civilization with its primitive Other(s).²

These two complementary and controversial tendencies on the part of the British are significantly exemplified by one particular country, that is Persia, or Iran, as it is now officially called. Its culture and history and its political relations to Great Britain, especially from the second half of the nineteenth century up to the beginning of the twentieth, contribute to the importance of Persia both as epitome of British attitude in the Middle East and as a particular case because of its socio-historical singularity.

As far as its distinctive features are concerned, Iran, as its name highlights, is ethnically closer to Europe than the other Middle Eastern countries. As a matter of fact, while

¹ Nash, *op.cit.*, p.57.

² *Ibid.*, p.56.

the name “Persia” comes from the south-western province of Fars, from where the famous Achaemenian kings originated,³ “Iran” derives from “Aryan”, the name with which the ancient Indo-Europeans who settled in that area since 1000 B.C. called themselves.⁴ Therefore, the Iranians have Indo-European origins which are still evident in their language and culture despite the Arabic invasion in 637 A.D. This factor resulted in Westerners considering Persia as “an intermediary link between Europe and its imagined cultural origins”,⁵ providing cultural authenticity, but also a source of exotic satisfaction due to its Arabic allure. This double nature was noticed by one of the best-known nineteenth-century travellers in Persia, that is Lord Curzon, who stated that “in no Oriental country [...] is the chasm of exterior divergence between Oriental and European scenery more abrupt than in Persia”.⁶ In addition, Iran has always been fascinating for Westerners also because of its magnificent past as a powerful empire, especially between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C., when it rivalled with Greece.⁷ All these elements explain the distinctive nature of Iran in comparison with other Middle Eastern countries, but it is necessary to examine how this distinctive nature acted in British travellers' minds between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly considering how the political relations between Persia and the British Empire in this crucial era affected travel.

The nineteenth century is undeniably a pivotal period for Persian politics, particularly from the second half of the century. The Qajar rulers increased the political contacts with foreign powers, especially Russia and Great Britain, and started the modernization of the country.⁸ Since his ascension to the throne in 1848, Nasiru'd-Din Shah encouraged the expansion of trade and the development of Persian international relations, but

³ Williams, *op.cit.*, p.18.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ T. Mazzeo, *Travels, Explorations and Empires, 1770-1835*, vol.4, *The Middle East*, London, Pickering & Chatto, 2001, p.xxvi, quoted in Nash, *op.cit.*, p.60.

⁶ Curzon, *op.cit.*, vol.1, pp.13-14.

⁷ Williams, *op.cit.*, pp.20-21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.27.

he did not manage to improve the welfare of all his people, in particular the large rural population who was vexed by poverty and suffered from the financial deficit of the country.⁹ The Shah tried to solve Persian financial problems with a dangerous solution which would characterize Persian history and connections with foreign countries for a long time. At first, he received loans from foreign governments, then he started selling them concessions to exploit Iranian resources, especially to the British.¹⁰

According to Denis Wright, Britain began to consider seriously its political interests in Persia since early nineteenth century, but these interests became increasingly crucial throughout the century, particularly between the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth.¹¹ Persia was strategically important for the British as “a buffer to French and Russian expansion in the East”¹² and, consequently, a defensive barrier for India, but it was also a source of commercial opportunities, both as a market for British goods and as the provider of valuable resources, such as oil.¹³ As far as British interests in Persia are concerned, G. Nash points out that they were divided into two different tendencies, which characterized British approach to Eastern countries in general. Some desired the “incorporation of the Oriental—ancient and picturesque—within the British imperial matrix”, while others aspired to the increase of British influence over Eastern nations “in the cause of preserving the latter’s cultural authenticity and/or protecting its development”.¹⁴ However, G. Nash claims that

whether the goal was absorption of Eastern peoples into empire, or promotion of their independence and distinctiveness, the result — their incorporation into Western discourse — was the same, and only represented dialectical oppositions from within a given field.¹⁵

⁹ Searight, *op.cit.*, p.101.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Wright, *op.cit.*, p.10.

¹² Nash, *op.cit.*, p.60.

¹³ Wright, *op.cit.*, p.10.

¹⁴ Nash, *op.cit.*, p.65.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.66.

This consideration seems to be substantiated by what Lord Curzon affirms in his work *Persia and the Persian Question*, published in 1892. As a matter of fact, he recognizes the strategic importance of Persia for Great Britain and describes British intervention in this country in the nineteenth century as focussed on “the departments of diplomacy, military administration, commerce, and the electric telegraph”.¹⁶ However, he claims that British policy in late nineteenth century should be more concerned with the improvement of Persian economic, political and social systems “under the pressure and by the aid of a friendly alliance”.¹⁷ His “belief in the civilizing virtues of the British Empire”¹⁸ brought him to think that the British could help the Persians to overcome what he thought to be their defects, particularly corruption and apathy, and initiate them to political and social reform.¹⁹ Therefore, Lord Curzon's analysis highlights the two tendencies which concerned British policy in Persia, that is to say exploitation and imperialistic aims on the one hand, and constructive influence on the other. Nevertheless, history proves that the border between these two tendencies is not so clearly defined, because, as Lord Curzon himself seems to infer throughout his work, and the Prime Minister of the time, Lord Salisbury, explicitly affirmed,²⁰ the reformation of Persia was useful to the British in order to strengthen an alliance which could facilitate the achievement of economic and political goals, particularly the preservation of India and, especially at the beginning of the twentieth century, oil exploitation.

British intervention in Persia became increasingly controversial between the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth and marked crucial episodes in Persian history. In 1890 Persia handed to a British company a concession

¹⁶ Curzon, *op.cit.*, vol.2, p.607.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.620.

¹⁸ D. Wright, “Curzon and Persia”, in *The Geographical Journal*, vol.153, no.3, 1987, pp.343-50, p.343.

¹⁹ Curzon, *op.cit.*, *passim*.

²⁰ R.L. Greaves, “British Policy in Persia 1892-1903, I-II”, in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, vol.28, 1965, pp.34-60/284-307, pp.35-36.

which conceded them control over Persian tobacco.²¹ This fact was highly criticized by the population with the first mass demonstration in Persian history, which obliged the Shah to cancel the concession.²² In the following years, new concessions given to Britain and Russia increased popular resentment and brought to the first Persian revolution in 1906, which resulted in the establishment of a constitution and a government, the Majles, which obviously reduced the power of the Shah.²³ However, the government was not so strong as to limit foreign interference in Persian affairs. In 1907, Britain and Russia divided Persia into spheres of influence without the approval of the Persian government.²⁴ Moreover, in 1908 Britain established the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in order to exploit Persian oil fields, and in 1914 the British government managed to obtain the majority share of this Company.²⁵ Thanks to the exploitation of oil and commercial and military control over the Persian Gulf, Britain gradually became the most influential foreign power in Iran in the first decades of the twentieth century, despite the persisting rivalry with Russia.²⁶

This influence culminated with the British support to an event which deeply changed Iranian history. Between 1917 and 1920 the conflict between Britain and Russia in Persia became increasingly acute and Persian government proved to be weak.²⁷ In 1921 Reza Khan, a General of the Persian Cossack Brigade, managed to overthrow the government and become Minister of War with a coup backed by the British, who hoped to stop Russian advance by imposing a strong Persian figure in the government.²⁸ Reza Khan proved to be an influential politician and committed himself to the modernization and reformation of Persia.²⁹ In 1923 he became Prime Minister and in 1925 he was appointed Shah of Persia by the

²¹ Searight, *op.cit.*, p.101.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ M. Axworthy, *Breve storia dell'Iran. Dalle origini ai giorni nostri*, Torino, Einaudi, 2010, pp.213-14.

²⁴ Searight, *op.cit.*, p.102.

²⁵ Axworthy, *op.cit.*, p.224.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.225-28, *passim*.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.230.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

government with the name of Reza Pahlavi.³⁰ His ascension to the throne signed the end of the Qajar dynasty with the dethronement of Ahmad Shah and the beginning of the new Pahlavi dynasty.³¹ These historical facts demonstrate that the period between the last part of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth was crucial for Persia and it was deeply marked by the British Empire. As already mentioned, these close connections obviously resulted in a huge number of British citizens, either diplomats or missionaries or actual travellers, journeying to and across Persia. Many of them reported their experience into writing and contributed to spreading information about Persia in Great Britain, creating an image of this country which is sometimes curiously illuminating and other times significantly tendentious.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.231.

³¹ *Ibid.*

2b. British travellers to Persia in the nineteenth century: landmarks and recurrent topics

“English literature”, states D. Wright, “is rich in nineteenth-century travel books about Persia”,¹ which is obviously the result of the aforementioned increasingly close connections between Great Britain and Iran between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These travellers varied considerably according to their profession, their reason to travel and the time they spent in this foreign country. There were professional figures like diplomats, consuls, ministers at the British Legation in Teheran and their wives, or doctors attached to medical missions or other British institutions, but there were also many private individuals who travelled to Persia for pleasure or cultural and archaeological interests.² Some of these multifarious travellers had a considerable impact on travel literature about Persia and are frequently quoted as authoritative references in other people's travel books between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Among those who travelled to Persia in the early nineteenth century, the most remarkable are James Justinian Morier, Henry C. Rawlinson and James Baillie Fraser. James Morier (1780-1849) was a diplomat who made two journeys to Persia between 1808 and 1816 for diplomatic purposes, the first time as Private Secretary of the British envoy Harford Jones, and the second time on a diplomatic mission on behalf of the British Foreign Office to gather information about Persia.³ He wrote two accounts of his travels, *A Journey through Iran, Armenia and Asia Minor to Constantinople in the years 1808 and 1809* and *A Second Journey through Iran to Constantinople between the years 1810 and 1816*, but he is mainly known for his fictional work *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan*, which was a real bestseller at the

¹ Wright, *The English amongst the Persians*, cit., p.149.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, pp.16-17, 151.

time.⁴ It belongs to a wide range of books about the Orient, which were extremely popular in the nineteenth century because of the aforementioned Western fascination for an East based on the *Arabian Nights*.⁵ However, Morier's *Hajji Baba* stands out as a particular case because it is not a traditional tale of Oriental wonders but a satire.⁶ It narrates the career of a Persian barber's son, Hajji Baba, who is endowed with those features that the author considers deeply rooted in Persian society and aims at criticizing, among which the most evident is treachery.⁷

Another notable British traveller who visited Persia in the early nineteenth century is James Baillie Fraser (1783-1856). He made a first journey to Persia for pleasure in 1821, while in 1833 he was sent there on an intelligence mission in order to collect information.⁸ He described his journeys in a number of travel books and drawings, and even wrote some romantic novels set in Persia.⁹ In *Narrative of a Journey into Khorasan in the Years 1821 and 1822*, which is the account of his first journey to Persia, he blames the character of Persian people, whose main features are "falsehood and treachery in all their shapes, cunning and versatility, selfishness, avarice and cowardice".¹⁰ Fraser's words, together with Morier's criticism of Persian treachery in *Hajji Baba*, represent an opinion which is frequently present in British travellers' books about Persia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. D. Wright points out that these travellers appreciated the Persians for their intellectual qualities, but expressed their contempt for what they perceived as defects, particularly deceitfulness and indolence.¹¹ These opinions were mainly provoked by the considerable cultural gap which existed between the British and the Persians. D. Wright explains that

⁴ Searight, *op.cit.*, p.258.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Wright, *The English amongst the Persians*, cit., p.153.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ J.B. Fraser, *Narrative of a Journey into Khorasan in the Years 1821 and 1822*, London, 1825, p.174, in Wright, *The English amongst the Persians*, cit., p.154.

¹¹ Wright, *The English amongst the Persians*, cit., p.154.

differences of language, religion and a whole way of life made for misunderstandings. The Persians, an old and proud race, reacted to displays of arrogance and assumed superiority in the niceties of comportment [...] But if the Persians could be offended, so too could the British. The religious doctrine of *tekiyeh* or dissimulation [...] [was] little appreciated by the more direct British.¹²

These misunderstandings and prejudiced opinions will be examined in the travel books of some late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century travellers in Persia, which will be analysed in detail in chap.3.

As far as British travellers who visited Persia in the early nineteenth century are concerned, there are other two remarkable travellers who are frequently quoted in other later travellers' books, that is to say Major Henry Rawlinson and Sir Henry Layard. Major Rawlinson (1810-1895) went to Persia for military and diplomatic purposes in the 1830s and 1850s, but he managed to journey widely across the country.¹³ He reported his travels in the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, which began publishing an increasingly large amount of travel accounts about Persia from that time onwards.¹⁴ Rawlinson was deeply interested in the Orient, and in Persia in particular, which is proved by the fact that he committed himself to deciphering the complicated cuneiform inscriptions on rocks in Kermanshah, a city in north-west Iran.¹⁵ This archaeological discovery can be compared with Layard's contribution to the excavations of the ruins of the ancient cities of Niniveh and Nimrud, in Iraq.¹⁶ This clearly demonstrates that many British travellers were also encouraged to visit the Middle East because of a sheer interest in Oriental archaeology and history, which was often intertwined with political motives, as is Rawlinson's case.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.155.

¹³ Searight, *op.cit.*, p.140.

¹⁴ Wright, *The English amongst the Persians*, cit., p.156.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.155-56.

¹⁶ Searight, *op.cit.*, p.189.

Nevertheless, Henry Layard (1817-1894) visited Persia just for pleasure, without any kind of diplomatic or political reasons, and some years afterwards he wrote a travel book based on his journey, *Early Adventures in Persia, Susiana and Babylonia*. This lengthy two-volume book is a notable source of information about early nineteenth-century Persia and is frequently cited as an example by later travellers. Layard left London in 1839 with his friend Edward Mitford on the purpose of travelling to Ceylon by land and visiting all the countries they would pass during their journey.¹⁷ They arrived in Persia by the western frontier. He describes in detail their journey to Kermanshah and Hamadan, two north-western cities which are frequently crossed by travellers coming from Baghdad, and emphasizes some problems that concern travelling in Persia. First of all, they had to bear the hostility of the Persian population and authorities, which suspected them to be British spies, mainly because, as Layard points out, the political relations between Great Britain and Persia at that time were complicated.¹⁸ Furthermore, Layard insists on the dangers of travelling in Persia, “a country notorious for the lawlessness of its inhabitants”.¹⁹ It is reasonable to believe that travelling in early nineteenth-century Persia, which still consisted of a majority of uninhabited and wild territories, was not easy and involved difficulties that could upset travellers from modern industrial Europe. However, Layard’s tone is often exaggerated and is probably a product of the aforementioned image of the Persians as a treacherous, thus dangerous, people. For instance, when he describes Hamadan he claims that

the population of the city was fanatical [...] There were in the irregular cavalry wild fellows from the mountain tribes, who would not have scrupled to take the life of a Christian and a European, and there was a lawless and vicious rabble of camp followers.²⁰

¹⁷ Wright, *The English amongst the Persians*, cit., p.157.

¹⁸ A.H. Layard, *Early Adventures in Persia, Susiana and Babylonia*, London, Gregg International Publishers Limited, 1887, 1971, p.92.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.93.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.94.

Besides these details concerning some aspects of the journey, Layard's travel book is particularly valuable for his account about the Bakhtiaris, an autonomous, partly nomadic population of Lur origins, which lives in tribes in the territory of the Zagros Mountains in the western provinces of Luristan, Khuzestan, Isfahan and the homonymous Chahar Mahal and Bakhtiari.²¹ The area occupied by the Bakhtiaris is commonly named Bakhtiari Country.²² When Layard visited Persia, nomads were an interesting "attraction" for travellers coming from an industrialized country such as Great Britain. Nomadism was a widespread phenomenon in Persia in the nineteenth century and still at the beginning of the twentieth, as will be testified by the travel books analyzed in this dissertation. As a matter of fact, several nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British travellers reported on their travel books their amazement in meeting nomadic tribes, particularly the Bakhtiaris, in different parts of Persia and describe their way of life and appearance. However, Layard managed to do more than this, because he was allowed to live with a Bakhtiari tribe for a period. While his friend Mitford decided to go to Ceylon after they reached Hamadan, Layard chose to stay in Persia and go to Isfahan, one of the most important Persian cities and the ancient capital of Persia, because he wanted to know this country more deeply.²³ He did not follow the usual road from Hamadan to Isfahan, but decided to "keep as close as I could to the great range of the Luristan Mountains. [...] a part of Persia which, I had reason to believe, had not been at that time explored by previous travellers".²⁴ This proves that Layard was already interested in the Bakhtiari Country before he actually had the opportunity of visiting it widely. This opportunity occurred in Isfahan, where he met an important Bakhtiari *khan*, that is to say a chief, who accepted to travel with him across the Bakhtiari Country.

²¹ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol.2, Chicago, Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 1951, p.946.

²² Curzon, *op.cit.*, vol.1, pp.283-84.

²³ Wright, *The English amongst the Persians*, cit., p.159.

²⁴ Layard, *op.cit.*, p.99.



1. Henry Layard in Bakhtiari dress

Thanks to his stay with the Bakhtiaris, Layard was able to provide a meticulous description of their customs, look and personality, highlighting their uniqueness in relation to the other Persians. He describes both men's and women's traditional dresses,²⁵ and their particular language, which, as he explains, is a Persian dialect named Luri, "a corruption of the pure old Persian without the modern intermixture of Arabic and Turkish", therefore "they are believed to be of pure Iranian or Persian blood".²⁶ As has been previously mentioned, sometimes his tone is emphatic, for example when he deals with the controversial bellicose nature of the Bakhtiaris. He claims that they lead a relatively autonomous life in Persia and their relations to the Persian government are constantly marked by hostilities and war.²⁷ Furthermore, Layard maintains that "they bear the very worst reputation in Persia. They are

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.119.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.162.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

looked upon as a race of robbers—treacherous, cruel, and bloodthirsty”²⁸ and their chiefs “lead the life of mediaeval barons—at constant war with each other, plundering their neighbour’s goods [...]”.²⁹ This last remark particularly exemplifies Layard’s inevitable Western look and perspective, especially in the expression “mediaeval barons”. This spontaneous conditioned gaze is a constant feature in travel books, and it is even more evident when there is a huge gap between the travellers’ own culture and the culture of the host country, as is the case of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British travellers to Persia. However, as far as Layard is concerned, in his book he also expresses gratitude for the hospitality that he received from the Bakhtiaris, and shows explicit admiration for this population, about whom he states: “they are a splendid race, far surpassing in moral, as well as in physical, qualities the inhabitants of the towns and plains of Persia”.³⁰ His appreciation is even more enthusiastic when he relates that the Bakhtiaris he lived with loved listening to their storyteller at night and were moved by his voice declaiming the *Shahnameh*, the popular Persian national epic poem by Firdousi.³¹

Layard’s accurate description of the Bakhtiaris was a significant contribution to Persian studies at that time, but it also provided later travellers who wanted to visit the Bakhtiari Country with important information. Among these travellers, it is necessary to recall Elizabeth Ross, a doctor who lived with the Bakhtiaris from 1909 to 1914,³² and the famous writer Vita Sackville-West, who wrote a noteworthy account of her twelve days’ stay in the Bakhtiari country, which will be discussed later in this dissertation. The Bakhtiaris are also mentioned in the travel books of other two important travellers who visited Persia in later nineteenth century, that is to say Edward Granville Browne’s *A Year amongst the Persians* and Lord George Curzon’s *Persia and the Persian Question*. As Layard’s book, their accounts were considered actual landmarks by later travellers to Persia, as will be evident

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.131.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.109.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.162.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.212.

³² Wright, *The English amongst the Persians*, cit., p.119.

with the analysis of British travel books about Persia between the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth.

As far as Browne (1862-1926) is concerned, he was a Cambridge scholar interested in Eastern languages, who spent a whole year in Persia between 1887 and 1888 in order to acquire direct knowledge of Persian society and customs. In his travel book he describes in detail the different stages of his journey by caravan across the main Persian cities, particularly Tabriz, Teheran, Isfahan and Shiraz, and also provides a wide range of digressions on some aspects of Persian culture, such as religion, history and art. He entered Persia by caravan from the Turkish town of Erzeroum, following the hard “old caravan road” to Tabriz,³³ a Persian city in the northern province of Azerbaijan, while for his return journey he chose the more usual way through the Caspian Sea. It is interesting to consider the different ways by which British travellers decided to reach Persia at that time, in order to realize which journeys were more conventional and which were more unusual. In Browne’s case, the fact that he chose a difficult route to reach Persia, rather than the easier way across the Caspian Sea, is a clear sign of his motivation and interest in crossing more unconventional places.

One of the most remarkable features of Browne’s travel book is the attention paid to the Iranian landscape, which is common in earlier, contemporary and later travel accounts about Persia because of the uniqueness and diversity of Iranian natural settings. In his biography about Curzon, the aforementioned diplomat and writer Harold Nicolson, who spent some years in Persia in the 1920s as Counsellor at the British Legation, claims that those who have travelled in Persia are “for ever haunted by those plains of amber, those peaks of amethyst, the dignity of that crumbled magnificence, that silence of two thousand years”.³⁴ As

³³ E.G. Browne, *A Year amongst the Persians*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1893, 1927, p.20.

³⁴ H. Nicolson, *Curzon: the Last Phase, 1919-1925*, New York, Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1934, pp.121-22.

a matter of fact, the landscape presents a multiplicity of nuances, consisting of luxuriant lands in the northern area of the Caspian Sea, the two huge rocky mountain ranges of the Elburz in the north and the Zagros in the west and the two wide hilly deserts in the east, the Dasht-e Kavir and the Dasht-e Lut.³⁵ Therefore, it is not surprising to find in Browne's book some multifaceted descriptions, such as "between us and these mountains lay a wide, flat, stony plain"³⁶ and "the humid, richly-wooded provinces bordering on the Caspian Sea".³⁷ Moreover, Browne and many other travellers in their books reported the amazement that they felt when they happened to see the famous Persian gardens in villages and even in inconceivable places like deserted plains and hills. For instance, on his way to Tabriz, Browne crossed the "beautiful little city of Khúy",³⁸ where there were "pleasant gardens of poplars, willows, and fruit-trees, and fields planted with cotton".³⁹ As far as British appreciation of Iranian landscape is concerned, M.H. Braaksma highlights the fact that it is increasingly evident in nineteenth-century travel books:

the interest of the sixteenth and seventeenth century traveller was in the first place taken up by man [...] the traveller of a later age, thanks to his prejudices erred seriously when judging Oriental humanity [...] Fortunately he had another strong and comforting interest: Nature. Entirely parallel with its development in general literature, we notice an awakening of the sense of nature, in the literature of travel of any pretension at least, not only as a source of soothing reflection, but as a thing to be loved and admired.⁴⁰

Besides his interest in landscape, Browne's travel book, and his exordium dedicated to Persian readers, is a testimony of the author's sympathy towards the Persians and their culture, thanks to which he managed to gain "the esteem and affection of the Persians as no other Englishman had ever done",⁴¹ despite his awareness of the cultural gap between

³⁵ Williams, *op.cit.*, pp.14-15.

³⁶ Browne, *op.cit.*, pp.83-84.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.83.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.55.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Braaksma, *op.cit.*, pp.80-81.

⁴¹ Wright, *The English amongst the Persians*, cit., p.163.

himself and the Persian people.⁴² Browne's interest in Persia testifies to his fascination for the Orient in general, which brought him to study Eastern languages, but it is also a symptom of the aforementioned widespread exoticism which characterized British approach to the Middle East at the time, accompanied by a repulsion towards the modern industrial West. This exotic need for wilderness is easily recognizable in some passages of Browne's book, like "I was anxious to cling for a few days longer to the more Oriental abodes to which I had become not only accustomed, but attached [...]"⁴³ or "I sighed inwardly at the thought of exchanging the free, unconstrained, open-air existence of the caravan for the restraints of society [in Teheran]"⁴⁴.

Regarding British travellers' approach to Persia, or Middle East in general, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, M.H. Braaksma identifies two contrasting attitudes,

one of uncriticizing admiration of those dear and quaint Orientals with their funny clothes and charming manners who might have stepped straight from the pages of the *Arabian Nights*, or else one of thinly-veiled contempt for their unreliability and dishonesty, an attitude of mockery and cheap scorn; in other words the attitudes of most travellers show a constant wavering between the maudlin and the mildly sarcastic.⁴⁵

The former attitude is associated with the Western image of a romantic East, while the latter derives from the aforementioned prejudiced view of the Persians as deceitful and corrupt, which was often engendered by the disappointment of those travellers who had left with Oriental fancies in mind.⁴⁶ Although Braaksma's consideration appears slightly drastic, it is true that the attitude of many British travellers was ambivalent, and ranged from unrestrained fascination and appreciation, to bitter criticism concerning some aspects of Persian society and culture.

⁴² Braaksma, *op.cit.*, p.87.

⁴³ Browne, *op.cit.*, p.85.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.88-89.

⁴⁵ Braaksma, *op.cit.*, p.86.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.78.

An example of this ambivalence can be noticed in Lord Curzon's travel book, *Persia and the Persian Question*, which was published in 1892 and was an actual point of reference for later British travellers. For instance, it is significant that the famous diplomat Percy Molesworth Sykes dedicated his travel book, *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*, to "the right honourable Lord Curzon of Kedleston". Moreover, E.C. Williams, a British politician who travelled to Persia in 1903 and had met Curzon in India when the latter was Viceroy there,⁴⁷ did exactly the same and used the same words as Sykes. Regarding Curzon (1859-1925), he had been interested in the East since he was a student in Oxford, and travelled to various Middle Eastern countries, until he went to Persia in 1889.⁴⁸ At the time he was a Member of Parliament and would be involved in politics all his life, which justifies his evident political attitude towards Persia.⁴⁹ He spent a few months in Persia between 1889 and 1890 with the intention of collecting information about this country for a book he had planned to write.⁵⁰ He reached Persia via the Caspian Sea, and travelled on horseback to the main Persian cities, including Meshad, Teheran, Isfahan and Shiraz. He even voyaged by steamer up the important Karun River, in the west of Persia, "which, under strong British pressure, had been opened to foreign shipping the previous year",⁵¹ which demonstrates once more how deeply rooted was British influence in Persia. During his journey by land, Curzon frequently stopped at post houses, called *chapar khaneh*, where travellers could rest and hire new horses.⁵² Another resource for travellers in need of relax who journeyed on horses, camels, mules, or, since early twentieth century, by cars, was the caravanserai, which is a recurrent feature in many travel books about Persia between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

⁴⁷ E.C. Williams, *Across Persia*, London, Edward Arnold, 1907, p.ix.

⁴⁸ Wright, *The English amongst the Persians*, cit., p.165.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Wright, "Curzon and Persia", cit., p.344.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.345.

Curzon left Persia on January 1890 from Bushire, via the Persian Gulf, and went back to Great Britain, where he wrote his travel book.⁵³ This work is not just a book of travel, but “a full-length and life-size portrait of Persia”,⁵⁴ dealing with the main aspects of Persian culture and society, with particular attention to politics. In the introductory part, he attempts to detect the causes of the “fascination of the East”,⁵⁵ which has always peopled the Western mind as well as his own. He maintains that

perhaps it is that in the wide landscape, in the plains stretching without break to mountains, and the mountains succeeded by plains, in the routes that are without roads, in the roads that are without banks or ditches, in the unhampered choice both of means of progression and of pace, there is a joyous revulsion from the sterile conventionality of life and locomotion at home. [...] Or is it that in the East, and amid scenes where life and its environment have not varied for thousands of years, where nomad Abrahams still wander with their flocks and herds, where Rebecca still dips her water skin at the well, where savage forays perpetuate the homeless miseries of Job, western man casts off the slough of an artificial civilisation, and feels that he is mixing again with his ancestral stock, and breathing the atmosphere that nurtured his kind? [...] Countries which have no ports or quays, no railways or stations, no high-roads or streets (in our sense of the term), no inns or hotels, [...] are severed by a sufficiently wide gap from our own to appeal to the most gluttonous thirst for novelty. Do we ever escape from the fascination of a turban, or the mystery of the shrouded apparitions that pass for women in the dusty alleys?⁵⁶

Therefore, Curzon seems to be himself influenced by the exotic image of the Orient which has been described in the previous chapter of this dissertation. The Orient is the land of wilderness, mystery and authenticity, since “the habits are at this day in the same manner as in the precedent ages”,⁵⁷ unlike the Western world.

Nevertheless, despite this overt admission of love of the Orient, Curzon’s book is mainly focussed on politics, and, in this context, he reveals the aforementioned ambivalence, which characterized the British attitude towards the Middle East. While he is fascinated by the unchanging nature of the Orient, as far as politics is concerned he appears to be annoyed

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Searight, *op.cit.*, p.149.

⁵⁵ Curzon, *op.cit.*, vol.1, p.12.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.12-13.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.12.

by what he perceives as indolence and “torpor” on the part of the Persians,⁵⁸ who drowsily accept the corruption and financial problems which characterize their country.⁵⁹ Moreover, even if he describes the Persians as lively and intelligent people, he himself accuses them of being treacherous, stating: “I am convinced that a true son of Iran would sooner lie than tell the truth”.⁶⁰ The fact is that he explicitly hoped for a serious British involvement in Persia in order to reform both materially and morally a country that could be pivotal for the economic and political interests of the British Empire.⁶¹ Regarding Curzon’s contrasting tendencies towards Iran, G. Nash explains that he

derived aesthetic pleasure from experiencing the difference between the continual movement of the West and the seemingly perpetual stasis of the East. But his writings actively promote the view that imperial sway could not for long be separated from the political decay that resulted from such immobility. Curzon’s writings take the aesthetic as their starting point, matching a delight in the static Oriental scene with the political exigency arising from Eastern decay and its ramifications for the Great Game being played out on the chessboard of the East.⁶²

However, Curzon’s criticism of Persian inactivity would be contradicted a few years afterwards, when the Persians reacted to the Qajar’s misgovernment and foreign oppressive intervention by starting the aforementioned revolution, in 1906, which gave way to one of the most tumultuous period in Persian history.

In conclusion, in the nineteenth century Persia was a destination for many British travellers, who were pushed to visit this country for a wide range of reasons, either political, professional or personal. Some of these travellers wrote travelogues that became indispensable sources for later British citizens who journeyed to Persia. Furthermore, their works are endowed with characteristics that would be recurrent in later travel books about

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, vol.2, p.618.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.627-29.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.633.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, *passim*.

⁶² Nash, *op.cit.*, p.65.

Persia, like the profound interest in Iranian landscape and nomads and a view of Persia and Persians influenced by the widespread idea of an exotic Orient and by the obvious socio-cultural gap between Great Britain and Persia.

3. British travellers in Persia, 1890s-1920s

3a. Women travelling for pleasure: Gertrude Bell's travels in Persia in the 1890s

Socio-historical motives associated with a widespread patriarchal system limited women's mobility for a long time until the twentieth century.¹ C. Thompson points out the fact that home was considered the proper sphere for women, who had to face up with a long series of constraints when they desired to travel.² However, this does not mean that women always stayed at home, on the contrary a large amount of them had the opportunity of accompanying their husbands or relatives on travel, but they rarely travelled alone until the nineteenth century, when "restrictions in this regard began to be relaxed [...] in Western culture at least, and it became increasingly acceptable, although still not entirely unproblematic, for women to travel on their own".³ The majority of them usually opted for touristic pre-determined itineraries, but some dared to go on adventurous journeys off the beaten track.⁴ Most importantly, the nineteenth century also saw a considerable increase in the publishing of travel books written by women in comparison with the two previous centuries,⁵ which proves that women's experiences were gaining consideration, although they were treated with diffidence when dealing with topics which were considered appropriate for men, such as science.⁶ This is the reason why most women travel writers tended to emphasize more the subjective and emotional sphere in their travel accounts, as C. Thompson highlights.⁷

As far as Iran is concerned, travel books show that the number of British women who travelled across this country between the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries is considerable and even surprising, if we consider the obvious difficulties presented by transport and harsh climate. Some women travelled to Persia in order to join their

¹ Thompson, *op.cit.*, p.169.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p.170.

⁴ S. Searight, *Women Travellers in the Near East*, Oxford, Astene, Oxbow Books, 2005, p.1.

⁵ Thompson, *op.cit.*, p.170.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.182.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.185.

husbands who worked there as doctors or diplomats, others were involved in missionary actions, which represented a satisfactory professional opportunity and source of gratification, while others were brought there by pleasure or cultural interests. An accurate analysis of the travel books written by some of the women belonging to the first and last category clarifies that these women travelling independently were usually wealthy and accompanied by local servants who helped them during the journey. Despite their privileged condition, some of these women were particularly adventurous and embarked themselves on journeys which would have been hard also for men. A remarkable example of these bold women is represented by an eminent nurse, explorer and “one of the first woman members of the Royal Geographical Society”,⁸ that is to say Isabella Bird Bishop (1831-1904). Despite her health problems, she managed to travel widely throughout the world, visiting far-away countries like the United States, Australia, Japan, India and Persia from the 1850s onwards.⁹ C.E. Bosworth affirms that Isabella Bird was affected by a sort of “*furor vagandi*”,¹⁰ which is frequently referred to with the German word *Sehnsucht*, and consists in an impulse to leave one’s usual context and embark on new adventures.¹¹ The fact that Isabella Bird, or Bishop, which was her husband’s surname, travelled until late in her life confers her an even more mythical aura. As a matter of fact, when she visited Persia, she was almost sixty years old, and this journey was far from being easy.

She decided to go to Persia in 1890 after her stay in India from 1888 to 1889, where she had concerned herself with the work of the medical missions run by the Church Missionary Society.¹² She left from Karachi by steamer, accompanied by Major H.A. Sawyer, who had to go to Persia for a cartographical survey, and agreed to travel with her as far as

⁸ C.E. Bosworth, “The Intrepid Victorian Lady in Persia: Mrs Isabella Bishop’s Travels in Luristan and Kurdistan, 1890”, in *Iran, Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies*, vol.27, 1989, pp.87-101, p.97.

⁹ D. Middleton, “Some Victorian Lady Travellers”, in *The Geographical Journal*, vol.139, no.1, 1973, pp.65-75, pp.69-70.

¹⁰ Bosworth, *op.cit.*, p.97.

¹¹ M.E. D’Agostini, *La letteratura di viaggio. Storie e prospettive di un genere letterario*, Milano, Guerini e Associati, 1987, p.13.

¹² Bosworth, *op.cit.*, p.89.

Teheran and Isfahan.¹³ They arrived in Baghdad in January 1890 and planned to reach Persia from the western border. The journey on mules from Khanaqin to Teheran was characterized by extreme hardships, which were mainly due to the winter weather. In her travel book about Persia, *Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan*, which is actually a collection of letters with illustrations, Isabella Bird describes the difficulties she had to endure while crossing the Zagros Mountains, where she fought against mud, rain that “fell in persistent torrents, varied by pungent swirls of sleet and snow”,¹⁴ or high snow, which made the journey extremely hard for mules and even caused an accident that procured her “a number of bruises [...] and a bad cut, which bled profusely”.¹⁵ In spite of all these troubles, Mrs Bishop, like many other travellers, as has been previously pointed out, could not ignore the extreme beauty of the Iranian landscape, “that uplifted, silent world of snow and mountains, on whose skirts for some miles grew small apple and pear trees, oak, ash, and hawthorn, each twig a coral spray”.¹⁶

During her nine months’ stay in Persia, Isabella Bird did not only visit important cities like Teheran and Isfahan, but managed to travel across the Bakhtiari Country and continued to northern Kurdistan and Azerbaijan, which proves again her courage and sheer love of travel. In the preface of her travel book, which is significantly dedicated to “the untravelled many”, she deals with what she hoped would be the aims of this work. What she affirms about these aims deserves to be taken into account, because it provides a humanitarian definition of travel that is worth mentioning before starting the analysis of other travellers’ books. First of all she hopes that her work will contribute to increasing British knowledge of Persia, “a country and people with which we are likely to be brought into closer relations”,¹⁷ which clearly hints at Anglo-Persian political relations. Secondly, and most importantly, she

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp.89-90.

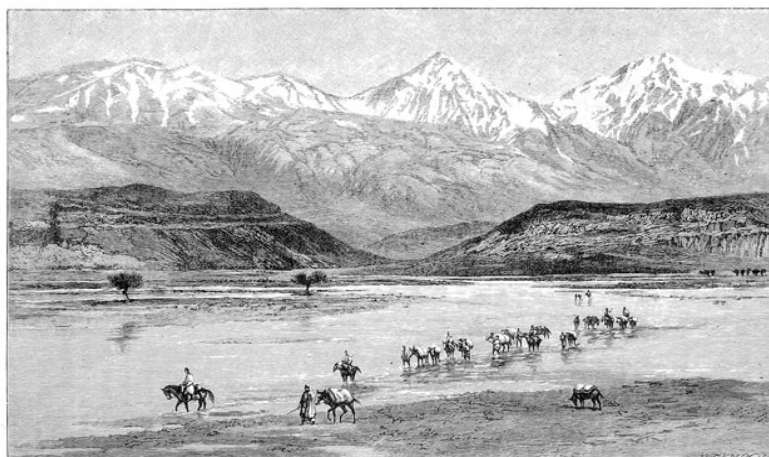
¹⁴ I. Bishop, *Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, Including a Summer in the Upper Karun Region and a Visit to the Nestorian Rajahs*, vol.1, London, John Murray, 1891, p.81.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.92.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.90.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.vii.

would like her travel book to lead to what she considers the real goal of travels, “that goal to which all increase of knowledge of races and beliefs tends – a truer and kindlier recognition of the brotherhood of man, as seen in the light of the Fatherhood of God”.¹⁸



2. The Karun River

Another woman who was certainly affected by “*furor vagandi*”, and visited Persia short after Isabella Bird, is Gertrude Bell. She is a remarkable figure in British history and managed to distinguish herself both in the cultural and the diplomatic fields. She was born in Durham in 1868 and started travelling since she was young.¹⁹ Her stepmother, Lady Florence Bell, who edited Gertrude’s letters after her death, describes this unconventional woman as “scholar, poet, historian, archaeologist, art critic, mountaineer, explorer, gardener, naturalist, distinguished servant of the State”,²⁰ emphasizing her eclectic nature. Among all these activities, Gertrude Bell is probably best known for her intrepid travels and her political involvement in the Middle East.²¹ In 1913 she visited Northern Arabia alone, after various journeys throughout Europe.²² During the First World War, she was asked by the Intelligence

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.x.

¹⁹ J.E. Courtney, “Gertrude Bell”, in *The North American Review*, vol.223, no.833, 1926-7, pp.656-63, pp.656-57.

²⁰ G.L. Bell, *The Letters of Gertrude Bell*, vol.1, edited by Lady F. Bell, London, Ernest Benn Limited, 1927, pp.4-5.

²¹ Courtney, *op.cit.*, p.656.

²² *Ibid.*, p.659.

Service to go to Cairo in order to contribute to dealing with the Arabs, because she was famous for knowing that region in depth.²³

Following European triumph over the Ottoman Empire, she left Cairo and followed the British army to Baghdad, which was to become her hometown for the rest of her life.²⁴ There she was involved in rebuilding Iraq, which became a kingdom after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, and she obtained important political and cultural charges, such as the Management of the Museum of Antiquities in Baghdad.²⁵ She was a popular figure at the time and she even appears in the travel book of a later eminent traveller to Persia, that is to say Vita Sackville-West, with whom I shall deal in detail in my dissertation. Sackville-West stopped in Baghdad on her way to Persia in 1926 and, there, she met Gertrude Bell, whom she describes in praising and enthusiastic tones, emphasizing that

here she was in her right place, in Iraq, in her own house, with her office in the city, and her white pony in a corner of the garden, and her Arab servants, and her English books, and her Babylonian shards on the mantelpiece, and her long thin nose, and her irrepressible vitality. I felt all my loneliness and despair lifted from me in a second. [...] She had the gift of making every one feel suddenly eager; of making you feel that life was full and rich and exciting.²⁶

Long before starting her successful career, Gertrude Bell had the opportunity of travelling widely and, among the countries she visited, Persia occupies a unique place, because it generated her fascination for the Middle East, which would last all her life, as is evident from her aforementioned vicissitudes.²⁷

Bell was only twenty-three years old when she went to Persia, where she stayed from the spring to December 1892, as guest of her aunt, Lady Lascelles, and her uncle, the

²³ *Ibid.*, p.660.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Sackville-West, *op.cit.*, pp.59-60.

²⁷ Bell, *The Letters of Gertrude Bell*, cit., p.28.

diplomat Sir Frank Lascelles, who worked as British Ambassador in Teheran at that time.²⁸ Therefore, Bell embarked on this journey to Persia out of pleasure and curiosity, without any kind of political or diplomatic implications, but she certainly could have contacts with British diplomatic life in Persia, since she resided at the British Legation in Teheran with her relatives.²⁹ She even had the opportunity of spending a few months in Gula Hek, the summer resort of the British Legation.³⁰ The British Legation was the principal diplomatic body through which the British Empire managed its affairs in Persia, while other consulates were spread in other important cities of this country, such as Kerman, Isfahan and Meshad.³¹ Ella Sykes (1863-1939), diplomat Percy Sykes's sister, who travelled widely across Persia with her brother in the 1890s, offers a detailed description of the British Legation in her travel book *Through Persia on a Side-Saddle*: “a large building in an Anglo-Indian style of architecture, with a clock tower, and surrounded by a beautiful garden containing avenues of trees and an abundance of running water”.³²



3. The British Legation, Teheran

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.25, 32.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.25.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Curzon, *op.cit.*, vol.1, pp.310-11.

³² E. Sykes, *Through Persia on a Side-Saddle*, London, A.D. Innes & Company, 1898, p.16.

As Lady Florence Bell highlights in her edition of Gertrude's letters, Gertrude wrote a huge amount of letters during her life, which are a significant source of information about her journeys around the world.³³ As far as her journey in Persia is concerned, many letters were unfortunately lost, and in Lady Bell's edition only one letter is inserted.³⁴ However, the most important testimony of her Persian journey is certainly a short travel book, which was published in 1894 by Ernest Benn Limited, entitled *Safar Nameh. Persian Pictures*. This piece of writing was not conceived as a uniform account of Bell's experience in Persia, but it actually consists in an adaptation of some letters she sent from Persia, which accounts for its fragmentary nature.³⁵ It is divided into twenty chapters, each one endowed with a title which explains its content; the fourteen first chapters deal with Persia, while the remnant ones are about her return journey from Persia through Turkey. The chapters concerning Persia relate her travels and adventures in the northern part of the country, particularly Teheran and other villages near the capital, and end with her journey towards the Caspian Sea, where she was to take the steamer to Baku, in Azerbaijan, where her return journey to England would begin. Throughout the chapters, Bell provides "colourful little sketches"³⁶ of Persian landscape, culture and everyday life, emphasizing her feelings and reactions to what she experienced. She recounts her visits to archaeological sites and luxurious palaces, her walks through smelly and swarming bazaars in Teheran and in other villages, her journeys on horseback and her encounters with Persian people, who are frequently described, like in many other travel books, as extremely polite. Consequently, her travel account presents a long series of interesting stylistic and thematic issues concerning travel writing and the Middle East, which deserve to be analysed in detail.

³³ Bell, *The Letters of Gertrude Bell*, cit., p.3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.25.

³⁵ Bell, *Persian Pictures*, cit., p.x.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Style: pathos, subjectivity and refined language

The epistolary origins of this travel book are not only the cause for its fragmentariness, but also explain why the tone is often intimate and emotional. S. Searight highlights that letters are an efficacious method of relating a travel experience, because they provide immediacy and a direct insight into travellers' personality, which help readers to share their feelings and incidents more vividly.³⁷ Letters, as well as diaries, are undoubtedly endowed with a higher degree of authenticity than travelogues, because they report travellers' immediate impressions about what they are experiencing, while travelogues are always the product of retrospective lens and structural organization. Regarding Bell's travel book, it is a hybrid combining the vividness of letters and the thought-out structure of travelogues. Emphatic passages such as "Whether he be prince or soldier or simple traveller, God be with him! Khuda hafez—God be his Protector!"³⁸ about a polite Persian host or "Damp, delicious, green forest, trees and trees set thickly over the uneven ground—such a joy to the eye as never was after long months of arid desert, dust and stones!"³⁹ reveal emotions which are more likely to be conveyed by letters. However, the structure of the chapters which compose *Persian Pictures* is not epistolary-like, since there are no direct addresses to hypothetical addressees and no indications of dates. Furthermore, the refined narrative style and the sophisticated nature of the contents clarify that Gertrude Bell consistently managed the original letters in order to adapt them to the structure of a book of travels.

Bell's style strikes the reader with a lyricism which is hardly found in earlier travel accounts. As has been mentioned in chap.1b, travel books were characterized by radical changes from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, gradually acquiring an increasing

³⁷ Searight, *Women Travellers in the Near East*, cit., p.7.

³⁸ Bell, *Persian Pictures*, cit., p.72.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.85.

subjective allure and reducing the number of pages from late nineteenth century.⁴⁰ This is clearly proved by Bell's travel book, which, compared with Layard's or Browne's travel accounts, privileges subjectivity over objectivity, and aesthetics over facts, and is incredibly shorter. This prominent subjective tone is the consequence of both the original epistolary structure and the aforementioned women travellers' tendency to reserve more space to their emotions, rather than to objective and factual observations. This is a feature which will be evident in other women travellers studied in this dissertation and will be clearly contrasted by the objective analytical tone of Sir Percy Sykes's travel account. The following passage can be useful to illustrate the emphatic subjective tone often used by Gertrude Bell:

and we, too, passed out of the silence and remembered that we lived. Life seized us and inspired us with a mad sense of revelry. The humming wind and the teeming earth shouted "Life! life!" as we rode. Life! life! the bountiful, the magnificent! Age was far from us—death far; we had left him enthroned in his barren mountains, with ghostly cities and out-worn faiths to bear him company. For us the wide plain and the limitless world, for us the beauty and the freshness of the morning, for us youth and the joy of living.⁴¹

Here Bell relates her visit to the ancient city of Rages, which is believed to be the oldest settlement in the Teheran area. She often uses "we" instead of "I", in order to refer to her fellow travellers as well, but she never explains explicitly with whom she is travelling. This passage highlights another important aspect of Bell's work. Although it is true that subjectivity is present in different degrees in all travel books, since they are the tale of an individual's journey, what strikes most in Bell's travel book is the refined language and suggestive images which she uses, which are more typical of novels.

A significant contrastive example may clarify the exceptionality of Bell's style in *Persians Pictures*. In their travel account most travellers to Persia provide a description of Teheran, which, in its being the capital, was necessarily a common destination. Both E.

⁴⁰ Cocker, *op.cit.*, pp.7-8.

⁴¹ Bell, *Persian Pictures*, cit., p.12.

Browne and Lord Curzon objectively describe the main geographical, architectural and social features of the city, highlighting its modernity compared with the other Persian cities. Browne explains that “Teheran is an essentially modern town, and as such lacks the charm which invests Isfahan, Shiraz, Yezd, and other Persian cities of more respectable antiquity”,⁴² while Curzon points out that “Teheran, the modern capital of Persia, has frequently been spoken of by travellers, with some suspicion of contempt, as a new city”,⁴³ and it actually was. As far as Ella Sykes is concerned—who, as has been stated, visited Persia in the 1890s, as Gertrude Bell—she admits she was disappointed by Teheran at first, because of its dirt and untidiness,⁴⁴ but then she uses more enthusiastic words about the climate—which “seemed to exhilarate me in the most delightful way”⁴⁵—parties, bazaars and the Elburz Mountains, which “used to look magnificent”.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, these descriptions of Teheran cannot reach the suggestive power of Bell’s introduction to the city, which forms the exact beginning of her travel book. She arrived in Teheran from the western gate, thus from the desert, which surrounds the western and southern parts of Teheran, while the north-eastern side consists of mountains and vegetation. Bell’s words manage to convey the strong contrast between the surrounding desert and the swarming life of the city to the reader. She begins the chapter in this evocative way:

the modern capital of Persia lies in a plain ringed half-way round by mountains which on the northern side touch with frozen summits the regions of eternal snow, and on the east sink into low ranges of hills, stretching their naked arms into the desert. It is the chief city of a land of dust and stonewaste and desolate.⁴⁷

⁴² Browne, *op.cit.*, p.100.

⁴³ Curzon, *op.cit.*, vol.1, p.300.

⁴⁴ E. Sykes, *op.cit.*, p.15.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.17.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.30.

⁴⁷ Bell, *Persian Pictures*, cit., p.1.



4. Elburz Mountains and Mount Damavand in the distance

This passage is absolutely different from the matter-of-fact language which characterizes most earlier and contemporary travel books. Bell's powerful narrative style manages to create a vivid image imbued with the emotions which must have sprung from the author's first confrontation with the desert. The end of the chapter about Teheran equals the beginning in terms of intensity:

with the impression of the deserted western roads still fresh in your memory, the appearance of the bazaars and of this eastern gate will fill you with surprise. Tehran, which from the west looked almost like a city of the dead, cut from all intercourse with the outer world, is alive after all and in eager relationship with a world of its own.⁴⁸

Similar sophisticated and evocative speculations are widespread in *Persian Pictures*, and contribute to the reader's pleasure in reading this travel book. More examples of her refined style will be provided in reference to the three most significant thematic aspects which characterize Bell's piece of writing, that is to say the interest in Iranian landscape, the fascination for a "generalized" Orient and episodes of cultural clash.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.8.

Landscape: breathtaking variety and travel hardships

As M.H. Braaksma points out, from the nineteenth century onwards, British travellers to Persia paid increasing attention to nature and landscape in their travel books.⁴⁹ The unique variety of Iranian landscape and its being so different from British landscape must have been, and still is, a stimulating source of interest. Furthermore, landscape was constantly and inevitably present in the everyday existences of travellers in Persia, because journeys across this country were necessarily characterized by continual efforts to overcome the many difficulties presented by its geophysical structure, as well as by transport deficiencies. The narration of the hardships against which travellers had to fight is a common feature of travel books about Persia. As far as Gertrude Bell is concerned, she travelled on horseback, followed by servants and muleteers who carried her baggage on other horses or mules. This was explicitly referred to as the best way to travel in Persia by two other British travellers, that is to say C. Willis, an ophthalmologist who visited Persia in the last decades of the nineteenth century,⁵⁰ and the aforementioned Mrs Hume-Griffith, who went there with her husband in 1900.

Furthermore, Mrs Hume-Griffith lists the most common methods of travelling in Persia, including carriages and *kajavah*, which were “cage-like boxes suspended one on each side of two animals”,⁵¹ but explains that “the most pleasant way of all is to have your own horses for riding, and thus be able to set your own pace and not have to be bound down to the slow, wearying, never-changing rate of the caravan”⁵², which carries the baggage. This means of transport is also preferable because of the precarious condition of Persian roads at the time, about which many travellers complain in their accounts, and the steep and rugged nature of

⁴⁹ Braaksma, *op.cit.*, pp.80-81.

⁵⁰ C.J. Wills, *In the Land of the Lion and Sun, or Modern Persia*, London, Macmillan & Co., 1883, pp.413-16, *passim*.

⁵¹ M.E. Hume-Griffith, *Behind the Veil in Persia and Turkish Arabia*, London, Seeley & Co., 1909, p.23.

⁵² *Ibid.*

Iranian soil, which weavers between mountains, hills and sandy desert.⁵³ From the twentieth century, a new means of transport began to be increasingly used in Persia as well as all over the world, that is to say cars, which gradually changed travellers' relation to landscape. At the beginning of the century the use of this means was limited, and it was mainly employed, together with traditional conveyances, in the capital or other important cities in diplomatic contexts, as appears evident in Vita Sackville-West's travel account, where she frequently hints at cars.⁵⁴ In a significant passage she highlights the contrast between "motors", that is to say cars, and the way of travelling of local peasants, nomads or lower-class people, who commonly journeyed on foot, on horses or by carts:

such peasants as we met wore long blue coats with a broad, twisted sash; [...] They travelled on foot, on horseback, or in waggons, going at a foot's pace [...] If the distances seemed great to us, sweeping along in a powerful motor, what must they have seemed to that crawling string, whose day's journey meant no change of scene, no appreciable lessening of the stretch between mountain-range and range?⁵⁵

Another problem for travellers in Persia between the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth was represented by accommodation, especially in the desert.⁵⁶ Travellers in Persia could opt either for camping or resting in the sporadic lodgings for travellers, which were spread throughout Persia.⁵⁷ As hinted at in chapter 2b, there existed two main types of lodgings, that is to say caravanserais and post-houses.⁵⁸ The latter was an essential point of reference for travellers who journeyed on horses or mules because in these places they could change their weary animals with new ones. Among all travellers, Ella Sykes provides the most evocative picture of a traveller's life in Persia, where

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp.23-26, *passim*.

⁵⁴ Sackville-West, *op.cit.*, *passim*.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.68.

⁵⁶ Hume-Griffith, *op.cit.*, pp.132-33.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

there are no trains or steamboats to be caught, no crowded hotels to put up at. The traveller leaves one guest-house after another without regret; camp after camp is pitched and then struck, inducing a constant eagerness to press on and reach the next stage of the march. And yet there is no hurry about all. The caravan halts at the pleasure of its master, and stops as long as he chooses, the tent-life making the journey one delightful picnic.⁵⁹

As far as Gertrude Bell is concerned, in the narration of her journeys on horseback throughout northern Persia she insists more on the hardships connected with the hot weather and the constant and annoying presence of dust along the road than on those related to accommodation or transport. Weather in Iran varies a lot according to seasons and regions, presenting cold winters and very hot summers in the north, while in the central and southern parts summers are torrid and winters are less freezing than in the north, and springs and autumns are averagely mild in the whole country.⁶⁰ Therefore, while in the travel books of people who travelled in the winter there are remarks about the troubles caused by snow and rain, in Bell's travel account it is frequent to find complaints such as "the sun creeps higher, shadows and mists vanish, the dust dances in the hot road",⁶¹ or "Down there in the town how the sun blazed! The air was a haze of heat and dust",⁶² and again "the roads were ankle-deep in dust, and the sun blazed fiercely almost as soon as it was above the horizon",⁶³ with the haunting presence of dust which constitutes a "fil rouge" all along the narration. Sometimes she also compares Persian weather with English weather, confessing the difficulty of getting used to a different climate: "Sunshine-sunshine! tedious, changeless, monotonous! Not that discreet English sunshine which varies its charm with clouds, with rainbows, with golden mist".⁶⁴ However, in a letter to her cousin Horace Marshall, she also addresses praising words to the weather, when in the summer she had the opportunity of leaving hot Teheran and

⁵⁹ E. Sykes, *op.cit.*, pp.44-45.

⁶⁰ S. Williams, *op.cit.*, pp.13-14.

⁶¹ Bell, *Persian Pictures*, cit., p.74.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.21.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.60.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.68.

finding shelter in higher places on the hills: “the joy of this climate! I don’t think an English summer will be very nice after it!”⁶⁵

The most striking aspect of Bell’s passages about landscape and journeys is certainly the large amount of remarkable descriptions of Iranian landscape, testifying to her amazement for an environment which was extremely different from the one to which she was accustomed in England. Evocative descriptions of Iranian nature are a common feature of all travel books about Persia, but in *Persian Pictures* Gertrude Bell really does her best to communicate her admiration to the reader, using a highly sophisticated language. She is at the same time fascinated and upset by the desert and the barren ranges of mountains and hills which constitute the majority of Iranian landscape, highlighting that “there is a certain fine simplicity in a landscape from which the element of water, with all the varied life it brings in its murmuring train, is entirely absent [...] the simplicity of her landscape is the fine simplicity of death”.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, what strikes her most seems to be the contrast between extreme barrenness and the luxuriant vegetation which suddenly grows up in the shape of gardens. Persian gardens were admired and praised by all British travellers, and one of the chapters of *Persian Pictures* is even entitled “In Praise of Gardens”, where she deals with various private gardens which she visited during her stay in Persia, among which one belonged to the Shah. She suggestively describes them with a pathos which highlights the happiness and relief arousing from the view of reinvigorating and colourful vegetation after miles of aridity:

a fringe of barren mountains on the horizon... Yet in this desolation lurks the mocking beauty of the East. A little water and the desert breaks into flower, bowers of cool shade spring up in the midst of dust and glare, radiant stretches of soft colour gleam in that grey expanse. Your heart leaps as you pass through the gateway in the mud wall; so sharp is the contrast, that you may stand with one foot in an arid wilderness and the other in a shadowy, flowery paradise. Under the broad thick leaves of the plane-trees tiny

⁶⁵ Bell, *The Letters of Gertrude Bell*, cit., p.28.

⁶⁶ Bell, *Persian Pictures*, cit., pp.1-2.

streams murmur, fountains splash with sweet fresh sound, white-rose bushes drop their fragrant petals into tanks [...].⁶⁷



5. A Persian garden

Orientalism: exotic approach to the East and generalizations

As already explained, in his famous work *Orientalism* E. Said criticizes Western hegemonic attitude towards the East.⁶⁸ Actually, he even justly condemns the use of the terms “West” and “East”, which are clearly the product of a Western-European perspective, which has always considered what lies to the east of Europe, mainly the Middle East until the first decades of the twentieth century, as the “Other”.⁶⁹ Said points out the fact that the Orient has been dealt with by the Occident both as “a topic of learning, discovery and practice” and as “a collection of dreams, images and vocabulary”, transforming it into a stereotyped compact

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.14-15.

⁶⁸ Said, *op.cit.*, pp.5-7, *passim*.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.43, 63.

object.⁷⁰ This attitude has a strong political matrix, but is not just a political issue, because it has permeated Western culture to such a degree that the Orient has become a “topos” endowed with certain characteristics, which are frequently tendentious.⁷¹ As explained in chapter 1b, British travellers from the eighteenth century onwards manifested a double tendency towards the Orient, which was associated both with political motives and with exotic suggestions of literary and cultural origins. Furthermore, M.H. Braaksma explains that the image of “a romantic East” was not without consequences, because

many travellers setting out Eastward saw, or thought they saw, which comes to the same thing, what they had been made to expect they would see. The determination to see in the East more than an outlet for European commodities, or a diplomatic battleground, however praiseworthy in itself, led in most cases to a further distortion of the image of the East in the Western mind, because the outlook of the travellers themselves was blurred by a home-made veil of Oriental romanticism.⁷²

Gertrude Bell, who, according to C. Ghani, was “drawn to the East by the spirit of romance”,⁷³ was undoubtedly affected by this “Oriental romanticism”, and in her travel account there are many examples of Western exotic and frequently stereotyped vision of the Orient. The most evident feature of Bell’s narration is probably her tendency to consider some characteristics concerning Persia as a starting point to indulge in speculations about the more general East, to which she refers with the female pronoun “she”. This propensity to generalize and see Persia as a unit of a uniform area is itself a symptom of Western distorted vision of the Orient, and is retraceable in the writings of other travellers. For instance, in Vita Sackville-West’s and Mrs Hume-Griffith’s travel accounts the reader can notice sporadic expressions which associate some incidents characterizing their life in Persia with a broader

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.73.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.177.

⁷² Braaksma, *op.cit.*, p.78.

⁷³ C. Ghani, *Iran and the West: a Critical Bibliography*, vol.1, London, Kegan Paul International, 1987, p.35.

Oriental context, such as “the amiable mendacious way of the East”,⁷⁴ “limp Oriental methods”,⁷⁵ “all the abandon of an Eastern love”⁷⁶ or “one of the most notable scenes of Eastern life”.⁷⁷ However, while the frequency of these generalizations is not considerable in these two travellers’ accounts, Bell makes wide use of them. For example, when she describes the tranquil behaviour of a Persian who gave her hospitality, she evocatively asserts that “the Oriental holds aloof [...] He stands and waits the end”,⁷⁸ an immobility which is in contrast with “the busy breathless life of the West”.⁷⁹ However, this immobility becomes irritating for her when, during a cholera epidemics, she criticizes the inaction of the Persians, labelling it as “Oriental fatalism”.⁸⁰ Another example of generalizing speculation on the “East” can be retraced in the chapter about gardens, where she states:

the East is full of secrets—no one understands their value better than the Oriental; and because she is full of secrets she is full of entrancing surprises. Many fine things there are upon the surface: brilliance of colour, splendour of light, loneliness, clamorous activity; these are only the patterns upon the curtain which floats for ever before the recesses of Eastern life: its essential charm is of more subtle quality. As it listeth, it comes and goes; it flashes upon you through the open doorway of some blank, windowless house you pass in the street, from under the lifted veil of the beggar woman who lays her hand on your bridle, from the dark, contemptuous eyes of a child; then the East sweeps aside her curtains, flashes a facet of her jewels into your dazzled eyes, and disappears again with a mocking little laugh at your bewilderment; then for a moment it seems to you that you are looking her in the face, but while you are wondering whether she be angel or devil, she is gone.⁸¹

This passage also illustrates the vision of a romantic and exotic Orient which permeates most travel books about Persia. In Ella Sykes’s *Through Persia on a Side-Saddle*, there are explicit remarks such as “the ‘gorgeous East’ has always possessed a strong

⁷⁴ V. Sackville-West, *Twelve Days in Persia. Across the Mountains with the Bakhtiari Tribe*, London, Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 1928, 2009, p.14.

⁷⁵ Sackville-West, *Passenger to Teheran*, cit., p.81.

⁷⁶ Hume-Griffith, *op.cit.*, p.34.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.112.

⁷⁸ Bell, *Persian Pictures*, cit., p.71.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.33.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp.13-14.

fascination for me”⁸² or “the glamour of the East penetrated me from the first moment of landing on its enchanted shores”,⁸³ which are a consequence of the image of the Orient as a place of wonders, and different from the Western world. In the aforementioned letter to her cousin, Gertrude Bell even exclaims, after describing some aspects of her stay in Persia: “isn’t it charmingly like the *Arabian Nights!*”⁸⁴ The same sense of exoticism is evident in Bell’s description of bazaars as places where “the thronging Oriental life is in itself an endless source of delight”⁸⁵ full of exciting colours and sounds, or in her enthusiastic and enchanted account about the treasure which she saw in the Shah’s palace, with emeralds and rubies “flashing and sparkling in the sunlight, gleaming through dark corners, irradiating the whole hall with their scintillant brightness”.⁸⁶ Furthermore, in the last chapter about Persia in *Persian Pictures* Bell openly refers to the *Arabian Nights*, which, as stated, have always filled in Western mind with wonderful images of a mythic and mysterious Orient, “a fairy region full of wild and magical possibilities”.⁸⁷ However, she frankly admits that contemporary travellers do not find the fairy-tale world they imagined, because “the supply of bottled magicians seems, indeed, to be exhausted, and the carpets have, for the most part, lost their migratory qualities”.⁸⁸ Indeed, in her travel book, Bell does not hide the existence of disquieting aspects about Persian society, like the widespread poverty, the negligence of soldiers, the decay of buildings and the inevitable increasing presence of Western features, of which the soldiers’ uniforms are an example. Despite this divergence from the dreamlike image of Persia, Bell encourages Western travellers not to abandon the fancies with which they are grown up,⁸⁹ and she seems herself incapable of conveying her Persian experiences without the filter of her exotic preconceptions, which confirms A. Brill’s remark that travel

⁸² E. Sykes, *op.cit.*, p.1.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.2.

⁸⁴ Bell, *The Letters of Gertrude Bell*, cit., p.27.

⁸⁵ Bell, *Persian Pictures*, cit., p.6.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.55.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.87.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.88.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

books about the Middle East are always a mixture of direct observations and subjective projections.⁹⁰

Cultural clash: difficulty of understanding and impenetrability

A travel experience necessarily involves a close encounter with a culture which, sometimes, is substantially different from the traveller's own culture. This divergence often causes difficulties in understanding, about which travellers can be more or less conscious and to which they react with indifference, prejudices or a desire of penetrating into the other culture and understanding its dynamics. In *Persian Pictures*, Gertrude Bell frequently deals with the problems which she experienced when she was confronted with certain aspects of Persian culture, which she felt at times impenetrable, obscure, or even annoying. Three episodes are particularly significant to illustrate this phenomenon. The first one is about a miracle play and a procession which Bell beheld during the month of Muharram, which Shiah Muslims dedicate to mourning the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. Hussein, Mohammed's grandson, was killed on the tenth day of Muharram in the Plain of Kerbela, in Iraq, by the soldiers of Khalif Yezid, whom Hussein refused to accept as a leader.⁹¹ Bell conveys her amazement at hearing "the wailing cries of the mourners"⁹² which started in the evenings and continued throughout the night.

What seems to have struck her most is the procession in honour of Hussein which took place in a village near Teheran:

early in the afternoon sounds of mourning rose from the village. The inhabitants formed themselves into procession, and passed up the shady outlying avenues [...] First in the procession came a troop of little boys, naked to the waist, leaping round a green-robed mollah, who was reciting the woes of the Imam [...] The boys jumped and leapt round him, beating their

⁹⁰ A. Brilli, *Il viaggio in Oriente*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2009, p.12.

⁹¹ Bell, *Persian Pictures*, cit., p.23.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.25.

breasts—there was no trace of sorrow on their faces [...] They were followed by men bearing the standards of the village. [...] But it was in the evening that the real ceremony took place. [...] The mollah read on, detailing the sufferings of the Imam: “He thirsted, he was an [sic.] hungered!” The women rocked themselves to and fro in an agony of grief, the men beat their bare breasts, tears streamed over their cheeks, and from time to time they took up the mollah’s words in weary, mournful chorus [...].⁹³

Gertrude Bell explains that this experience was particularly impressive and upsetting for her because of the easiness with which Persian people showed their feelings and cried, which was surprising for a British woman, because “to the Englishman tears are a serious matter”.⁹⁴ Moreover, the fact that there were many Persian spectators around her who did not seem to share the sorrow of those who were mourning, tempted her to think that “this show of grief was a mere formality, signifying nothing”.⁹⁵ She does not conceal that the divergence from her own culture and the exaggeration and supposed fictitiousness of the display of sorrow pushed her to feel “disgust and weariness”,⁹⁶ but what is most significant is her acknowledgement that these feelings were the consequence of the impossibility to penetrate into this aspect of Persian culture and understand completely what was going on in front of her.⁹⁷

Another episode which highlights the difficulty of dealing with a different culture from one’s own concerns Bell’s relationship with a Teherani man called Sheikh Hassan, who gave her private lessons of Persian. Language is certainly one of the main obstacles which have to be overcome by travellers, especially if they visit a country where the local language has little in common with their own language, as is the case in Persia. Bell insists on the barrier which language and culture built between her and her Persian teacher, and even

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp.25-27.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.27.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.28.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.29.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

regretfully exclaims: “Pity that such a gulf lay between us”.⁹⁸ They had to communicate in French, because Bell knew little Persian and Sheikh Hassan did not know English.⁹⁹ The use of a language which neither of them spoke fluently did not facilitate their intercourse, and, although they managed to talk about a wide range of topics, such as education and politics, the barrier was always standing there, because the absence of “a satisfactory medium through which to convey our thoughts to each other”¹⁰⁰ was stronger than the possible human affinity which could grow during their intercourse.

The last episode which evidences the impenetrability of a different culture is about Bell’s encounter with nomads in the desert surrounding Teheran. She openly expresses her fascination for these tribes who live a symbiotic relationship with landscape and regulate their lives according to their essential needs and the rules of nature.¹⁰¹ They regularly reside in the valleys in cold seasons, but when spring comes, and the heat starts to be haunting, they migrate towards hills and mountains.¹⁰² The eternal circularity and primitive essentiality which govern their life exercised a strong charm on Gertrude, because, as she highlights, “every man loves to fancy himself a wanderer”.¹⁰³ However, she dishearteningly admits that this feeling is destined to remain a “fancy”, an exotic fancy on the part of people who would not renounce the comforts of civilization after all.¹⁰⁴

in vain you try to imagine yourself akin to these tented races, in vain you watch and imitate their comings and goings; the whole life is too strange, too far away. It is half vision and half nightmare; nor have you any place among dwellers in tents. [...] Return to your cities, to your smooth paths and ordered lives; these are not of your kindred. The irretrievable centuries lie between, and the stream of civilization has carried you away from the eternal loneliness of the mountains.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.61.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp.39-42, *passim*.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p.40.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.39.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.44.

Therefore this episode does not only point out the clash between two completely different worlds, but also the exoticism which strikes Europeans when they come into contact with phenomena which are no more present in their own culture, and at which they frequently look through the filter of idealization.¹⁰⁶



6. Nomad women

¹⁰⁶ Brillì, *op.cit.*, p.153.

3b. An eminent diplomat-traveller: Sir Percy Sykes

The increasingly close political relations between the British Empire and Persia between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries consequently led to a considerable presence of British diplomats and consuls on Persian soil. The British had already established substantial contacts with Persia from early seventeenth century, when the East India Company started to be interested in this Eastern country for commercial purposes.¹ However, as already explained, British interest became more serious from late eighteenth century all through the nineteenth, when they realized the importance of Persia as a strategic barrier for India and, later, as a source of power in the shape of oil.² These interests obviously made it necessary for the British Empire to create permanent diplomatic posts in this country, ranging from the Legation in Teheran, which was the ambassadorial institution where the British Minister resided, to consulates.³ D. Wright significantly highlights that from the first half of the nineteenth century the number of British consulates in Persia increased exponentially, and if before 1841 there were no consulates in Persia, in 1921 there were twenty-three, located in the principal Persian cities.⁴ The first consulates were opened in Tabriz and in Teheran in 1841.⁵ At the beginning, consuls were selected from the common British residents in Persia but, after the establishment of a Consular Service, they were substituted by professionals.⁶

As D. Wright points out, the main consequence of the creation of these diplomatic posts was the increase of British communities in Persian cities and villages, where life was not easy for British citizens, who had to face the understandable hostility of the Persians, annoyed by the considerable presence of foreigners, mainly Russian and British, who were

¹ Wright, *The English amongst the Persians*, cit., p.3.

² *Ibid.*, pp.10-11.

³ *Ibid.*, pp.75-93, *passim*.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.75.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.79.

⁶ *Ibid.*

the protagonists of the so-called “Great Game”,⁷ which “the British and the Russians were then playing for influence in Persia”.⁸ Although many diplomats, such as Lord Curzon, insisted on the fundamental importance of British action in Persia not only for the interests of the British Empire, but also for the social, economic and political improvement of Persia itself, their intervention remained controversial both in this and in other Middle Eastern countries, as S. Searight explains:

the reforming instinct was very pronounced in the Victorians, and the diplomats and administrators working in the Middle East to protect British interests were by no means averse to describing their political activities as labour for the good of the country concerned, which indeed they often were. The drawback was that British interests were not always compatible with those of the Middle East peoples as they roused themselves from the torpor induced by centuries of despotism.⁹

Consequently, it is significant that, in her travel account, Isabella Bird, the aforementioned intrepid traveller, praises the fact that the administration of trade in the Karun River passed from a British to a Persian company, stating: “I am strongly of opinion that if the [Persian] Empire is to have a solid and permanent resurrection, it must be through the enterprise of Persians”.¹⁰

A great British figure who had been involved for a long time in this “Great Game”, and nurtured a profound fascination for Persia, is Sir Percy Sykes. Persia was not only the centre of his political career, but this foreign country and its culture really conditioned his whole existence, as frequently happened to travellers in the Orient.¹¹ Percy Molesworth Sykes was born in 1867, and, after attending Rugby school, he received military

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.89.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.75.

⁹ Searight, *The British in the Middle East*, cit., p.150.

¹⁰ Bishop, *op.cit.*, p.12.

¹¹ Brill, *op.cit.*, p.85.

training at the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst.¹² Then he soon joined a cavalry regiment in India, where he began venting his passion for explorations, which would characterize his whole life.¹³ In 1893 he made his first journey to Persia, and from 1893 until 1918, despite some interruptions, his existence would always be intertwined with this country, so that through Sir Sykes's life it is possible to retrace the major events which characterized Persian history between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁴ His first two journeys in Persia between 1893 and 1894 were determined by both personal and political motives. In 1893, when he had to rejoin his regiment in India after a leave, on his way he had the opportunity of travelling throughout Persia, particularly the eastern regions, where he could gather important information for the Government of India, which was concerned about Russian pressure in this area.¹⁵ Between the end of 1893 and the beginning of 1894 he embarked on a second journey, this time exploring the eastern province of Baluchistan, where he again carried out intelligence surveys.¹⁶ This critical area was monitored with great interest by the British, because it confined with the British territories in Pakistan, thus it was strategically important.¹⁷

After these two journeys, in 1894 Sykes left his regiment and was charged to found a consulate in the south-eastern region of Kerman.¹⁸ In 1898 he founded another consulate in Sistan, a strategic eastern province, and in 1905 he was appointed Consul-General in Meshad, in north-eastern Persia, where he resided until 1913.¹⁹ During these years between the foundation of the consulate in Kerman and the experience in Meshad, in spite of interruptions in England and South Africa, Sykes had the opportunity of travelling widely

¹² A. Wynn, *Persia in the Great Game*, London, John Murray Publishers, 2004, p.2.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.2-3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.2-3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

across Persia, and fully developed “his special gifts of observation, accurate writing, historical interest, and his desire to explore”.²⁰ His last incredible experience in Persia took place during the First World War, when, unlike his previous diplomatic charges, he was involved in military action. In 1915, German troops aroused the hostilities of Persian southern tribes against British influence in Persia, and also planned to provoke turmoil in the British Indian territories.²¹ Therefore, thanks to his knowledge of Persia, Sir Percy Sykes was sent by the British government to this country in order to fight against the Germans.²² He gathered Persian and British soldiers, and created a temporary army called South Persia Rifles, with which he managed to defeat the Germans and stop their advance towards India.²³ Despite its success, this military intervention was considered slightly controversial, because the British were accused of limiting Persian action in the South Persia Rifles and being motivated only by their interests.²⁴ Consequently, Sykes concluded his diplomatic and military life with an ambiguous success, and retired in 1920,²⁵ after arguing with Lord Curzon, because the former did not agree with the latter’s questionable plan to transform Persia into a British protectorate.²⁶

Sykes produced a wide range of writings about his experience in Persia, all of which are a testimony of his love for this country. He did not only write a conspicuous travel book entitled *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*, but also a semi-fictional work, a history of Persia and several articles published in *The Geographical Journal* between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. The semi-fictional work, published in 1910, is entitled *The Glory of the Shia World. The Tale of a Pilgrimage*, and is the alleged translation

²⁰ M.N.K., “Brigadier-General Sir Percy Sykes, K.C.I.E, C.B., C.M.G., 1867-1945”, in *Man*, vol.46, 1946, pp.42-43, p.42.

²¹ Wynn, *op.cit.*, pp.2-3.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Ghani, *op.cit.*, pp.362-63.

²⁵ Wynn, *op.cit.*, p.328.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.3.

of the autobiography of a Persian named Nurullah Khan, inspired by a man whom Sykes really met, who deals with his life between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and particularly describes his pilgrimage to the Shrine of Imam Reza, which is an important religious destination for pilgrims in Meshad. In the preface Sykes explicitly admits: “my ambition has been to write a second *Hajji Baba*, which would serve as a true picture of Persia some ten years ago, before the constitutional reform appeared on the horizon”,²⁷ where *Hajji Baba* refers to Morier’s aforementioned fictional novel about a controversial fictitious early nineteenth-century Persian, and the “constitutional reform” is the political event which gave Persia a constitution and a Parliament in 1906. The fact that Sykes wrote this singular work on contemporary Persia is a clear sign of his profound interest in the culture and vicissitudes of this country, which he meticulously describes in his two-volume historical work *A History of Persia*. As far as his contributions to *The Geographical Journal* are concerned, they are a significant source of information about Persia at Sykes’s time, and in 1908 his explorations and research on Persia granted him a gold medal from the Royal Geographical Society, of which he was a distinguished member.²⁸

Ten Thousand Miles in Persia: knowledge, explorations and landscape

Percy Sykes’s major writing about his experience in Persia is certainly his travel book *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*, which was published by John Murray in 1902 and was reprinted several times due to its considerable success.²⁹ It deals with Sykes’s eight first adventurous years in this Oriental country, from 1893 to 1901, and was highly praised by Lord Curzon,³⁰ to whom the travel book is dedicated. It is divided into thirty-eight chapters, each one with a title and a quotation from other authors’ works at the beginning. The chronological and linear narration of his life in Persia is enriched with drawings, pictures and

²⁷ Sir P. Molesworth Sykes, *The Glory of the Shia World*, London, Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1910, pp.iii-iv.

²⁸ M.N.K., *op.cit.*, p.42.

²⁹ Wynn, *op.cit.*, p.97.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.106.

photos, taken by the author himself during his stay. In the preface to his travel account he affirms: “no Englishman has travelled more extensively in Eastern and Southern Persia than myself”,³¹ and he is probably right. Furthermore, he did not limit himself to eastern and southern Persia, where he certainly made most of his explorations, but he also visited northern and central Persia, as is clear from his travel book, mainly travelling on horseback, with servants who carried his baggage on horses or camels. The seven first chapters deal with Sykes’s first journey to Persia in 1893 and meticulously retrace the route of his explorations. The opening of the first chapter is particularly suggestive, because he appears influenced by the image of an exotic East, which has been previously mentioned in reference to Gertrude Bell. As a matter of fact, after stating that “the land of Persia has always exercised a strong fascination on my mind”, he refers to this country with the expression “romantic Iran”.³² This overt exoticism is not a prominent feature of Sykes’s travel book, which is generally characterized by a straightforward and objective language, but it is evident that Sykes was not completely free from the exoticism of his time.

In his 1893 journey, Sykes arrived in Persia via the Caspian Sea, but instead of choosing the usual western route to Resht, he decided to go eastward, and took a steamer to the island of Ashurada, which lies on a lagoon. Thence he continued eastward and visited the country of the Turkoman, which occupies the north-eastern region of Iran, and at the time was famous for being dangerous because of robbers, so that he was “warmly congratulated upon having safely accomplished such a hazardous journey”,³³ when he arrived in Bujnurd, in the north-eastern region of Khorasan. His journey continued to the holy city of Meshad, and, then, he went on southward, crossing the Dasht-e-Lut, that is to say the desert, and visiting the south-eastern province of Kerman. On his way to Bushire, which is the port on the Persian

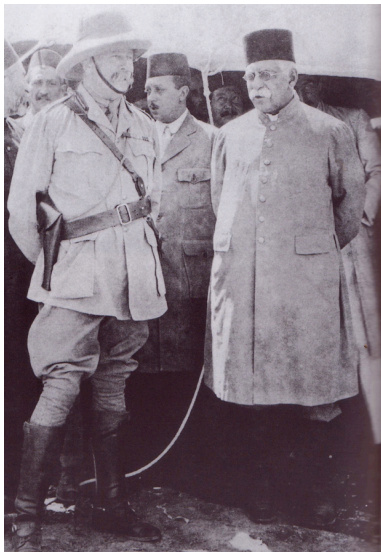
³¹ Sir P. Molesworth Sykes, *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*, London, John Murray, 1902, p.ix.

³² *Ibid.*, p.1.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.20.

Gulf where he would take the steamer to India, he visited the archaeological site in Persepolis and, most significantly, he met for the first time a person who would be of fundamental importance during his whole life in Persia, that is to say Prince Farman Farma, who was the Governor-General of Kerman at the time and a relative of the Shah's.³⁴ Sykes enthusiastically accepted the Farman Farma's invitation to his camp, which he envisaged as "a unique chance of gaining an insight into Persian life".³⁵ There Sykes had even the opportunity of trying gazelle shooting for the first time in his life, which he remarkably describes in detail in his travel account.³⁶ In his subsequent journeys to Persia, Sykes met Farman Farma many times, and this friendship certainly helped him in many diplomatic circumstances. As A. Wynn highlights

Persians say that to become friends with someone one must go on a journey with him; Sykes had not only travelled with Farman Farma, he had galloped with him in the hunt and, more than that, had won his respect by keeping up with him. This was practically the first time that any Englishman had met a high Persian official or a member of the royal family on any other than a purely formal footing. [...] The friendship that was formed from the chance meeting of these two men set their careers on a parallel course and created a mould for Anglo-Persian relations that was to endure for twenty-five years, with echoes that continued up to the reign of the last Shah.³⁷



7. Sir Percy Sykes with Prince Farman Farma

³⁴ Wynn, *op.cit.*, pp.21-22.

³⁵ P. Sykes, *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*, cit., p.76.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.76-77.

³⁷ Wynn, *op.cit.*, pp.21-22.

Sykes's second journey to Persia between 1893 and 1894 is described in chapters eight to thirteen. At the time he visited the eastern province of Baluchistan, of which he provides a detailed history to the reader. Particularly, he travelled across the regions of Makran and Sarhad, exploring deserted lands and even climbing a volcano named Kuh-i-Taftan, as well as crossing many minor villages, where he could discover new aspects of rural Persian society. Then, he went northwards and journeyed to the province of Kerman and the important cities of Yezd and Qom, finally arriving in Teheran, where he stayed at the British Legation and even met Shah Nasiru'd-Din. The following chapters of *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*, besides some digressions on Alexander the Great's and Marco Polo's travels in Persia, mainly deal with Sykes's return to Persia in order to found a consulate in Kerman, for which he left from England in November 1894 with his sister Ella. During his stay, he did not reside in Kerman all the time, but embarked on explorations and also carried out important diplomatic actions, particularly a boundary mission in Baluchistan and the foundation of another consulate in Sistan. As far as explorations are concerned, he travelled widely the provinces of Kerman and Baluchistan again, but also had the opportunity of steaming along the southern part of the Persian Gulf, and visiting the valley of the Karun River, in western Persia, important cities such as Shiraz and Isfahan, and again the archaeological site in Persepolis.

What is remarkable in Sykes's travel book is the author's style and approach, which denote general objectivity and precision. The narration of his journeys is always intertwined with information and accurate data about social, economic, political and cultural aspects of Persia. He also usually digresses on the history and main features of all the important regions or cities which he visited, with detailed and long accounts. For instance, he reserves two entire chapters to the description of every aspect of the province of Baluchistan; he provides complete geographical and historical information, deals with the origins of the

Baluchis and even reports a detailed list of the nomad tribes who lived in this region.³⁸ In chapter sixteen, he describes with equal meticulousness the city of Kerman, with a detailed account about history, population, industry and religious groups. The conclusive chapter of Sykes's travel book is itself characterized by precise information concerning British interests and material contributions in Persia. In order to justify British action in Persia, he diffusely deals with questions of infrastructures and trade, referring to the Indo-European Telegraph and the Imperial Bank of Persia as "the most important British interests which we are called upon to discuss".³⁹ Only at the end are there a few lines where he leaves the political issues and expresses his opinion about Persian character and politeness:

I have reason to consider the Persians to be the finest and most gifted race in Western Asia [...] Although by no means blind to the defects of a nation which was great and ruled the world when we were but savages, yet, sitting at home surrounded by trophies, the result of many an exciting stalk, with the walls covered with the exquisite old tiles and products of the loom which no European manufacture can rival, I feel that I can lay down my pen with all good wishes to my many Persian friends, and with a hearty and sincere FLOREAT PERSIS.⁴⁰

The emotional side of the conclusive chapter is entirely contained in these few lines, which appear after pages of rational argumentation and data. The over-inspired tone of his sister Ella's conclusion in her travel book *Through Persia on a Side-Saddle* is absolutely different and provides an outstanding contrast with Sykes's matter-of-fact approach:

I am again, in fancy, at Kerman, feeling a boundless energy and strength with which to carry out the duties of the day lying in front of me [...] Or I am "on the march", and we are eating a hasty breakfast in the chilly, starlit darkness before the dawn, while the tents are being struck and the groaning camels loaded up. [...] Then we must perforce mount our steeds, and perhaps ride across some great, dun-coloured plain towards a range of brilliantly tinted mountains—a ride through an utterly barren, desolate country, which yet possessed an enchantment that held me from the first to the very last. The cheerful tinkle of the caravan, the gleam of white tents, rambles in the cool evenings, and dreamless nights are among my

³⁸ P. Sykes, *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*, cit., pp.96-97.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.450.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.457-58.

reminiscences, coupled with the life-giving air, which coursed like wine through my veins and enabled me to laugh at fatigue and discomfort. It was the sun that made it a keen joy merely to be alive, as we rode through the frosty air in the winter months, and its glorious light is what I miss more than all in my native land. To the end of my days I shall be ever grateful for those happy years, so rich in friends and experiences, and the “Land of the Lion and the Sun” will never lose its charm for me.⁴¹

The prominence of a factual approach characterizes Sykes’s entire travel book and is certainly a consequence of the diplomatic nature of his stay in Persia, which necessarily required a careful gaze on each aspect of this country for the sake of British interests. Furthermore, according to C. Thompson, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century male travel writing was characterized by a larger amount of information on the country visited, because men travellers were obliged “to demonstrate that they have made some useful contribution to contemporary commercial, intellectual or strategic concerns”,⁴² which was not expected from women travellers. Moreover, B. Ashcroft highlights that in past centuries, especially in a European context, travel writing was originally a useful instrument for the desire of territorial discovery and possession.⁴³ As a matter of fact, travellers’ accounts contributed to a deeper knowledge of a foreign culture, which made this culture more familiar and, consequently, easier to domesticate, because “knowing it justified power over it, and it justified this power through the agency of a particular form of intimacy—the intimacy of observation, familiarity, knowledge”.⁴⁴ This connection between knowledge and power, which has been widely showed by E. Said,⁴⁵ appears to be a common feature of British travel writing about the Orient, and justifies the large amount of information about Persia in Sykes’s travel account, because, as A. Brillì explains, “l’Oriente britannico s’imbeve in ogni stagione del pragmatismo insulare ed è sempre sinonimo di luoghi sconosciuti da descrivere, di vuoti da

⁴¹ E. Sykes, *op.cit.*, pp.361-62.

⁴² Thompson, *op.cit.*, p.175.

⁴³ B. Ashcroft, “Travel and Power”, in J. Kuehn, P. Smethurst, *Travel Writing, Form and Empire*, New York, Routledge, 2009, p.229.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.230.

⁴⁵ Said, *op.cit.*, *passim*.

riempire nella carta geografica, degli ultimi lembi di terra da civilizzare”.⁴⁶ Therefore, it is significant that Sykes’s *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia* is full of references to the author’s desire to discover new territories and fill blank spaces on the map, which are certainly the consequence of his love for explorations, but may also derive from his gaze on Persia as a strategically important country for the British Empire. For example, during a journey in south-eastern Persia, he states: “I was delighted to see the map full of blanks in that direction, which I determined to fill in to the best of my ability”.⁴⁷ Other examples concern the exploration of the desert region of Sarhad, about which he immediately explains that “still largely figured on the map as a blank”,⁴⁸ or his journey across Makran, which aimed to acquire “knowledge about the wide unexplored tract to the west”.⁴⁹



8. Makran scenery

However, it would be unjust to examine Sykes’s travel book only from a political point of view, because it is first of all a book of travels and explorations, providing interesting

⁴⁶ Brill, *op.cit.*, p.82.

⁴⁷ P. Sykes, *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*, cit., p.72.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.125.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.116.

insights into travel hardships and Persian landscape and society, considered through the author's eyes. Actually, Sykes reserves more space to nature, places and tracks than to the native people he met, at whom he hints sporadically throughout his travel book and rarely dwells upon them for a long time, except when they are related to his diplomatic interests, such as the aforementioned Prince Farman Farma or other governors or *khans*. For example, when he deals with his first meeting with Prince Farman Farma, he describes him and his behaviour in detail:

Abdul Husein *Mirza*, whose title is Farman Farma, was about thirty-three years of age when I first made his acquaintance. He was slight, rather below the middle height and somewhat short-sighted. Educated by officers of the Austrian Mission, he had acquired a smattering of the military art, and was, generally speaking, well-informed for a Persian. His thirst for knowledge was a passion, and his quickness in picking up facts was quite Gallic. [...] I saw that my host enjoyed hearing about the outside world [...] We spent two days in a garden near Bahramabad [...] and after being royally entertained, I said good-bye to His Highness, who warmly invited me to join him in Baluchistan during the winter.⁵⁰

He provides similarly detailed information about other Persian governors or chiefs whom he met during his journeys, such as the Governor of Bujnurd, “who for many years had been Warden of the Marches, and enjoyed a great reputation. [...] Head of the Shahdillu Kurds, [...] [he] has been essentially a fighting man all his life”,⁵¹ and an important Baluchi *khan* named Zein-ul Abidin, “the son-in-law of the redoubtable Ibrahim Khan [...] possesses great capacity of a practical nature and a particularly good grasp of frontier questions”.⁵² As far as common natives are concerned, Sykes sometimes hints at the communities he encountered in the villages or towns where he stopped during his journeys, but usually confines himself to reporting their immediate collective reaction at the arrival of a foreigner. For example, during his travels across the Turkoman Country, he stopped in a village called Duhuk, of which he widely describes the landscape and geophysical structure, but dedicates only the following

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.76-77.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.21.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.123.

few general words to the inhabitants: “the inhabitants showed intense and not unnatural curiosity to see the first European who had come their way, which they frankly explained had been increased by hearing from pilgrims of the wonders that were done by *Farangis* [i.e. foreigners], especially at Bombay”.⁵³ On another occasion, during a journey across Makran, he dedicates a slightly wider passage to the inhabitants of the village of Maluran, who were diffident because they “had apparently never heard of Europeans”,⁵⁴ and even hints at their headman, “a particularly evil-looking rascal” with whom he had some troubles.⁵⁵ However, in the end the inhabitants of Maluran proved to be friendly, and courtesy is undoubtedly a feature to which Sykes frequently refers in relation to all the Persians he met, both political figures and common people. For instance, Prince Farman Farma is defined as a “courteous host”,⁵⁶ and village chiefs are often portrayed as polite, such as the chief of the village of Magas, who received him with “a warm welcome”.⁵⁷

Besides these hints at people and the aforementioned political implications, Sir Percy Sykes’s travel account is essentially concerned with environmental issues and travel dynamics. He took advantage of every opportunity to go on explorations, usually on horseback, always accompanied by servants and sometimes by other travellers, so that in an article for *The Geographical Journal* he declares himself “fortunate enough to have visited almost every part of this ancient kingdom”.⁵⁸ As already anticipated, he even embarked on dangerous journeys, such as the ascension of a volcano in Sarhad, despite the fact that his guide tried to dissuade him.⁵⁹ These frequent explorations obviously involved risks and difficulties. Among the common risks which Sykes had to face, robbers are certainly those which worried him most. For instance, on his way from Kerman to Bushire, he crossed a

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.35.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.114.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.114-15.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.76.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.128.

⁵⁸ Sir P. Molesworth Sykes, “A Sixth Journey in Persia”, in *The Geographical Journal*, vol.37, no.1, 1911, pp.1-19, p.2.

⁵⁹ P. Sykes, *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*, cit., pp.131-32.

region where he had heard that brigands were raiding, and could realize that this rumour was true: “we saw a band of seven horsemen, who rode for the next three days about half a mile off us. [...] I determined to march as far and as fast as possible, hoping thereby to get off their beat”.⁶⁰ On one occasion, while journeying across the Turkoman Country, one of his guides and muleteers themselves tried to rob him,⁶¹ which highlights the importance for travellers to find servants and guides who are not only efficient, but also honest, as is clarified by the aforementioned C. Wills, who travelled in Persia in the nineteenth century, and considered experienced servants and a “respectable muleteer” as fundamental requirements to journey in Persia.⁶²

As far as travel hardships are concerned, Sykes frequently deals with the main factors which made his journeys in Persia difficult, particularly transport and material complications, weather, and fatigue, which derives from exploring wild territories. Regarding transport and material needs, Sykes explicitly provides a description of what was necessarily involved in travelling in Persia at that time:

starting on an indefinitely long journey in Persia is no light task. Our *lares et penates* had, of course, to be left behind, but to calculate, purchase, divide into loads, and pack up supplies for a large party is a very heavy undertaking. On the one hand, economy in transport is desirable, but, on the other, to run the risk of a breakdown would be fatal; and if arrangements for forage to be ready on the road, for extra camels to carry it, and for securing a water-supply in the desert, be taken into consideration, it becomes evident how much preparation is needed.⁶³

On many occasions, deficiencies concerning these requirements obviously complicated Sykes’s journey. For instance, on his way from Kerman to Bushire, “there were no supplies to be had, we continued the march, always due west, and [...] stopped at a little hamlet, all tired out and hungry”,⁶⁴ or during a journey across Baluchistan horses suffered from lack of forage

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.80.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.18.

⁶² Wills, *op.cit.*, p.413.

⁶³ P. Sykes, *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*, cit., p.213.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.74.

and water, which remained Sykes's and mulateers' "chief anxiety" throughout the whole journey.⁶⁵ Sometimes complications were caused by the problem of obtaining animals and employing servants, which once even obliged him to postpone his journey and "spend some days in buying camels, as it was impossible to hire, and there was even more difficulty in engaging drivers at a reasonable price".⁶⁶ Furthermore, explorations also involved problems connected with the weather, which could range from "burning heat"⁶⁷ to snow or rain, and it once broke into "the heaviest hailstorm [...] I have ever experienced. My waterproof was torn off my shoulders and the plain became a shallow lake".⁶⁸ On more than one occasion, these weather hardships, together with the obvious fatigue caused by long explorations, even menaced Sykes's health with sudden fever or illness.

Sykes's frequent explorations consequently led him to pay constant attention to Iranian landscape, of which his travel book and his articles for *The Geographical Journal* provide many descriptions. Since most of his explorations took place across the south-eastern part of the Iranian plateau, he mainly deals with the wild desert landscape which characterizes those regions:

travelling in south-east Persia generally implies marching in a pitiless glare between ranges of stony hills, while the dusty plains are practically bare and naked; the weary wayfarer hails with enthusiasm any little spring, and even a stunted willow seems to be a thing of beauty in such a treeless expanse.⁶⁹

This relief deriving from the view of vegetal life after barren wilderness reminds of Gertrude Bell's enthusiasm at the sight of gardens springing up in the middle of the desert. However, Sykes appears to be particularly fascinated by the Dasht-e-Lut, that is the desert which stretches in south-eastern Iran, and devotes a large space to its description.⁷⁰ Persia presents

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.112.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.301.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.36.

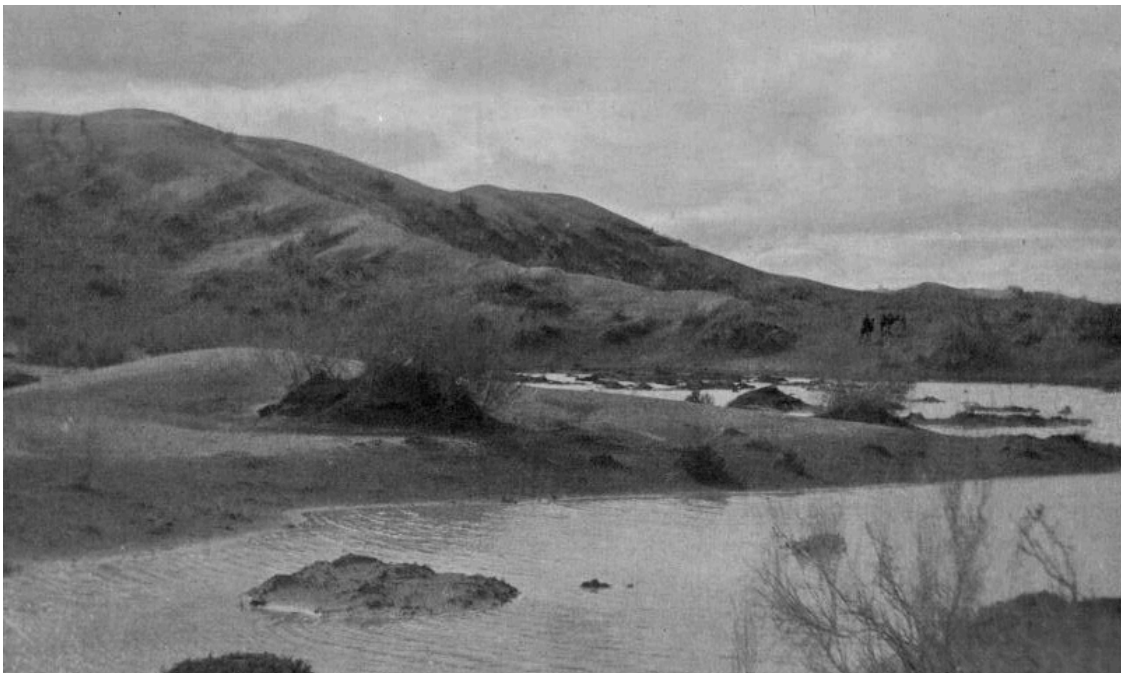
⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.151-52.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.46.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.31-33.

another desert, the Dasht-e-Kavir, to the south of Teheran, and although Sykes claims that they are both part of a same desert extension called “Lut”, which means “waste”, they have always been considered two distinct deserts.⁷¹ The Dasht-e-Lut, with its “funereal waste”⁷² and “low, black, sun-scorched hills”,⁷³ extends across the provinces of Kerman and Baluchistan, throughout which Sykes travelled widely. As he points out in an article for *The Geographical Journal*, what seems to strike him most about these arid regions is the presence of both human and vegetal or animal life, which, however rare, still appears as a miracle in this wilderness:

indeed, the more one travels in Persia, the more one admires the patient industry which successfully overcomes the grudging hand of Dame Nature, who is here revealed in square miles of level salt-covered soil, on which nothing whatever grows of itself, but where man, nevertheless, manages to produce good crops of wheat, barley, and lucerne.⁷⁴



9. The Lut

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.31.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.34.

⁷⁴ Sir P. Molesworth Sykes, “A Fifth Journey in Persia”, in *The Geographical Journal*, vol.28, no.5, 1906, pp.425-53, p.431.

However fascinating, wilderness often proved hard to endure for Sir Percy Sykes, whose travel book is scattered with manifestations of slight distress after long periods of exploratory isolation, and of consequent pleasure when this isolation was interrupted by social interludes. For example, during a long journey across the Turkoman Country, when he visited Iran for the first time, he admits: “I yearned for the sight of an English face after such a spell of loneliness”,⁷⁵ so that when he finally arrived at the Consulate-General in Meshad, “a warm welcome and a general air of comfort, with the first news of the outer world for nearly two months, made me feel inexpressibly content”.⁷⁶ The same relief is evident in a passage about an exploration in the arid region of Sarhad, when “after having been so long in the wilderness, it was quite pleasant to descend to the village of Magas, where we received a warm welcome”.⁷⁷ The considerable contrast between solitary life and social company could also be upsetting, as when, after a long journey through central Persia, Sykes arrived in Teheran, and “after seven months in the wilds, Teheran life was quite bewildering”.⁷⁸ However, despite the aforementioned material difficulties and the physical and psychological problems arising from the hard and isolated life of an explorer in the Persian wilderness, Sykes always considered his journeys in Persia as worth the fatigue he endured, and throughout his travel book and his articles he spares no opportunity to praise a “courteous and witty”⁷⁹ people and a country which he profoundly loved, where “every traveller who has once crossed its great plateau is fired with the desire to return again and again”.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ P. Sykes, *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*, cit., p.23.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.24.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.128.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.159.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.203.

⁸⁰ Sir P. Molesworth Sykes, “Recent Journeys in Persia”, in *The Geographical Journal*, vol.10, no.6, 1897, pp.568-97, p.569.

3c. Missionaries and doctors in Persia: Mr and Mrs Hume-Griffith

Among the different categories of British citizens who visited Iran between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, missionaries and doctors deserve particular attention. These two groups must necessarily be taken into account together not only because they both contributed to spreading Western culture in Persia, but also because they were intertwined, since a large amount of the British doctors who worked in Persia were members of Christian missions, managed by the Church Missionary Society.¹ As far as missionary work is concerned, according to Reverend S.G. Wilson, an American missionary who travelled to Persia at the end of the nineteenth century, Roman Catholics were the first to establish missions in Persia, as early as the sixteenth century, while Protestant missions started to appear in the eighteenth century.² D. Wright highlights that permanent British missions were established even later, so that “British missionary effort during much of the century was undertaken by individuals on relatively short visits”.³

However, in the last decades of the nineteenth century the situation had remarkably changed, and British missions were an important reality in Persia, mainly operating in central and southern cities such as Isfahan, Kerman, Yazd and Shiraz.⁴ As S. Mahdavi points out:

the American and British missionaries reached an agreement among themselves to divide the country in two spheres of interest: the Americans in the north and the British in the south. Thus it was that the Church Missionary Society of London (CMS) established a mission in Isfahan. It was started in Julfa by the Reverend Robert Bruce and his wife who, although they had been there since 1869 doing relief work, did not officially represent CMS until 1875. [...] Gradually other missionaries including doctors and nurses joined them and went on to establish stations in Kerman, Yazd and Shiraz.⁵

¹ Wright, *The English amongst the Persians*, cit., p.118.

² S.G. Wilson, *Persian Life and Customs*, Chicago, Student Missionary Campaign Library, 1895, p.298-99.

³ Wright, *The English amongst the Persians*, cit., p.114.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.118-19.

⁵ S. Mahdavi, “Shahs, Doctors, Diplomats and Missionaries in 19th Century Iran”, in *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol.32, no.2, 2005, pp.169-91, p.179.

These missions consisted of both male and female members. Women, whose opportunities were limited at home, considered missionary work as an important chance to play an active and independent role in the world and know different cultures.⁶ The main purpose of these missions was to spread Christian religion in Persia, where the majority of the population was Muslim.⁷ There were other religious groups such as Jews, Christian Armenians and Zoroastrians, who practised the ancient religion which was widespread in Iran before the Arab invasion,⁸ but Persian Muslims were certainly the ones with whom missionaries made most of their evangelical efforts. Their task was far from being easy, because Persians “were inclined to regard the missionaries either with intense hostility as interfering infidels or else with tolerance as harmless, well-meaning curiosities from another continent”,⁹ and rarely accepted to convert to Christianity. Besides obvious questions of faith, S. Mahdavi highlights that missionaries’ difficulties in converting Muslims were also due to the fact that Islam inflicted severe punishments to those who converted to another religion:

according to the Shari’a conversion from Islam to any other religion was not acceptable and all who did so were considered apostates (*murtadd*). Various punishments are stipulated for apostasy. In several Qur’anic *suras* the punishment is postponed to the next world [...] But the different Islamic schools of law (*fiqh*) differ in their interpretations of these Qur’anic verses. All are unanimous in stipulating the death penalty for a male apostate. Opinions differ over female apostate, some exempt women from the death penalty and others do not. Furthermore, even if the apostates escaped the death penalty, they were subjected to several legal and informal penalties such as confiscation of their property, enforced divorce from their spouse and ostracism by their family.¹⁰

These missionaries tried to overcome these difficulties and encourage conversion by means of philanthropic activities, which could appeal to Persians more than Christian

⁶ Searight, *Women Travellers in the Near East*, cit., p.82.

⁷ Mahdavi, *op.cit.*, p.181.

⁸ Hume-Griffith, *op.cit.*, pp.28-29.

⁹ Wright, *The English amongst the Persians*, cit., p.119.

¹⁰ Mahdavi, *op.cit.*, p.181.

doctrines.¹¹ Among these activities, the most significant was medical work, because of which many British doctors were introduced into Persia, and, consequently, European medicine with them.¹² They opened dispensaries and hospitals in various Persian cities and provided medical care to the entire population.¹³ Actually, many British, and previously French, doctors arrived at the beginning of the nineteenth century either attached to temporary diplomatic missions or employed in diplomatic seats, such as the British Legation.¹⁴ Some even managed to become the Shah's personal doctors or to teach Western medicine at the Dar al-Funun, the Polytechnic established by Shah Nasiru'd-Din's minister Amir Kabir in 1851 in Teheran.¹⁵ Therefore, medicine was an important means both for missionaries and diplomats to achieve their evangelical or political purposes and penetrate more deeply into Persian social fabric. However, Western doctors and medicine were not immediately accepted by the Persians, who tended to be suspicious and hostile, especially priests and traditional Persian doctors. S. Mahdavi highlights:

the opponents of Western medicine were the traditional doctors and the 'ulama. The traditional doctors saw their profession threatened and at the same time probably genuinely did not believe in the new system. [...] Most of the 'ulama were individually opposed to Western medicine for different reasons primarily because they saw their own position threatened. Until the establishment of the Dar al-Funun the 'ulama held the monopoly of education, including medicine. This was instrumental in their general opposition to the establishment of the Dar al-Funun and the teaching of Western sciences, including Western medicine. It was further complicated by the fact that within Galenic-Islamic medicine faith or religion was also a component. [...] The establishment and spread of Western medicine introduced a system with which not only the 'ulama were unfamiliar: but popular acceptance of it meant that their intellectual supremacy might come to an end and hence their control and power over the people.¹⁶

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Wright, *The English amongst the Persians*, pp.120-22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.122.

¹⁵ Mahdavi, *op.cit.*, pp.170-74.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.185-86.

Besides *'ulama* and traditional doctors, upper-class families were also sceptical about Western medicine and practitioners at first, but later on they changed their attitude and considered as a fashionable attribute to have a personal foreign doctor.¹⁷

As far as common and poor people are concerned, the majority of them immediately accepted the introduction of the new Western medicine, and frequently took advantage of the treatments of foreign doctors in the dispensaries of medical missions.¹⁸ Furthermore, they began to identify Westerners with Western medicine and often ask for medical help to foreigners who were not doctors, but whom they thought knew the secrets of that practice.¹⁹ Evidence of this behaviour can be retraced in some British travel books, such as Ella Sykes's *Through Persia on a Side-Saddle* and Vita Sackville-West's *Twelve Days in Persia*. On two different occasions Ella Sykes was asked by some nomad women to provide them some drugs which could cure their health problems. During a journey across the Kerman Province, one of the wives of a tribal chief, who had paid her a visit all together, started to complain about some pain which she felt. Ella Sykes offered her some medicines and immediately another wife took advantage of the situation and began lamenting a physical problem:

by and by the chief wife began to sigh and groan a good deal, and I was forced, in very politeness, to ask what was the matter with her. My inquiries having elicited that her ailment was a very simple one, I opened the medicine-chest with much ceremony, and delighted her with a gift of pills. Straightaway the third wife started a most curious complaint, affirming that whenever she smelt a flower or a fruit terrible pains would run through her whole body. This remarkable malady was entirely beyond my small skill, and I firmly declined to cope with it, putting away the medicines somewhat hastily as the slaves showed signs of wishing to be doctored for that universal, but somewhat vague complaint entitled *dard-i-dil* (heartache).²⁰

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.183-84.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.184.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ E. Sykes, *op.cit.*, pp.158-59.

On another occasion, during the same journey, a nomad woman pleaded with Ella to provide her some remedies for her aching eyes, but, after receiving a lotion, insisted on having more medicines, which made Ella understand that probably her pain was imaginary.²¹

As far as Vita Sackville-West is concerned, she had a similar experience when, on a journey across the Bakhtiari Country, she encountered some nomad *khans*, or chiefs, who warmly welcomed her and her fellow travellers. One of these chiefs, Ali Khan, confessed that he was feeling badly and asked them for help:

the cause of Ali Khan's irritability then transpired. He was not, he said, feeling very well: could the English, who were all doctors, do anything for him? Lionel Smith extracted his medicine chest from the pack of a mule, and stuck the thermometer under Ali's tongue. The other Khans all crowded round to watch. Lionel Smith then examined the thermometer, but seeing that he looked very much puzzled we enquired what was the matter. [...] Ali Khan, in fact, had a temperature of 108°. Fearful lest the man should die before our eyes, and we be blamed, we left him a large supply of quinine and hastily took our departure. We were told afterwards that men frequently run such temperatures in the mountains [...].²²

Furthermore, in chapter XIX of *Twelve Days in Persia*, Sackville-West reflects on the possible solutions which could contribute to changing and improving some social, economic and political aspects of contemporary Persia, such as irrigation, trade, transport, administration and healthcare.²³ Regarding healthcare, she quotes a passage from Gertrude Bell's *Persian Pictures* concerning the Persians' reaction to the cholera epidemic that struck Teheran, characterized by a lack of appropriate medical and hygienic measures.²⁴ Vita Sackville-West, who looks at Persia through the filter of her British background, hopes for a drastic improvement of Persian healthcare system and an increase of the number of dispensaries and hospitals throughout the country. She explains that Persian people

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.162.

²² Sackville-West, *Twelve Days in Persia*, cit., pp.60-61.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp.104-14.

²⁴ Bell, *Persian Pictures*, cit., pp.31-37.

themselves clearly feel the necessity of more efficient medical services, “judging by the way the peasants throng round the foreigner, asking for remedies”.²⁵ They rely on the power of Western medicine, and think that “all foreigners are doctors, and all doctors are omnipotent”.²⁶

Many references to medicine and medical missions can be found in Mrs Hume-Griffith’s *Behind the Veil in Persia and Turkish Arabia*, which is the travel book of a missionary doctor’s wife, who spent eight years, from 1900 to 1908, with her husband in various medical missions in Persia and the Ottoman Empire. It was published in 1909 by Seeley & Co. and is divided into two sections provided with photographs, the first one dealing with their Persian experience, which lasted three years, from 1900 to 1903, while the second one concerns Turkish Arabia. The first section consists of fourteen chapters, eleven of which are written by Mrs Hume-Griffith, while the last three are written by her husband, Dr A. Hume-Griffith, who provides some information about his medical work in Persia. Mr and Mrs Hume-Griffith left London for Persia in 1900 because he had been charged to open and manage a medical mission in the south-eastern city of Kerman by the Church Missionary Society. However, they did not travel directly to Kerman. They arrived from the Caspian Sea, passed across Teheran and stopped in Isfahan, where they remained for a year, in the Christian quarter of Julfa, because Dr Hume-Griffith was asked to replace temporarily the local missionary doctor, who was on leave. The following year, they went to Kerman, where Mr Hume-Griffith contributed to establishing a dispensary and a hospital, while in 1903, their last year in Persia, they lived in the central city of Yezd, where the doctor worked at the local missionary hospital.

²⁵ Sackville-West, *Twelve Days in Persia*, cit., pp.110-11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*



10. Mr and Mrs Hume-Griffith in Bakhtian costume

Before considering Mrs Hume-Griffith's travel memories, which obviously occupy the largest part of the work, since this is her own travel book, it may be useful to deal briefly with her husband's observations on medical work in Persia, in order to conclude the issue of medical missions and Western medicine. His account in the three last chapters consists of general considerations and anecdotes, which present some recurrent features, mainly concerning his opinions about medical missionary work, fanaticism and Persian doctors. As far as medical missions are concerned, he expresses his sincere admiration for these organs which carry on important philanthropic activities and contribute to spreading the Christian faith in Muslim territories, which proves that Mr Hume-Griffith was also deeply interested in religious issues, exactly as his wife was, who frequently deals with religion in her travel account. Regarding medical missions, Dr Hume-Griffith states:

“Medical Mission” need no apology or excuse. Even in the comparatively few years that have elapsed since their commencement, they have abundantly justified their existence, both from the missionary standpoint, and also as philanthropic agencies. If this be true for purely pagan lands, it

applies even more accurately to work in Mohammedan countries. Medical missionary work is, without doubt, the golden key that unlocks the door of the heart of the most fanatical Moslem, be he Persian, Arab, Kurd [...].²⁷

Fanaticism is an issue with which Dr Hume-Griffith frequently deals, especially in relation to the difficulties which he had to face because of his medical work. The main problems were caused by *mullahs*, that is to say the priests, who for the most part did not trust foreign doctors and considered them as a threat, as previously mentioned. For example, in Isfahan he had a difficult experience with *mullahs*, who “had proved themselves hostile to the presence of foreigners, and on more than one occasion they had endeavoured [...] to inflame the populace and cause a riot”.²⁸ Despite this hostility, he was called with another English doctor to cure a *mullah* who was said to have been poisoned, but when they arrived at the *mullah*'s house, he was already dead.²⁹ Dr Hume-Griffith and the other doctor were in danger of being accused of his death by the “fanatical crowd” who was surrounding the house moaning and crying, but they finally managed to escape.³⁰ On another occasion, in Kerman, he apparently managed to help the evangelical cause of missionaries while performing his medical work, when he was asked to cure the two-year-old son of an important *mullah*, who had been given a considerable quantity of opium by his mother to soothe him, opium being a widespread problem in Persia, according to Dr Hume-Griffith:

on arriving at the house with my assistant, we had considerable difficulty in making our way into the courtyard, as it was thronged with all the relatives and friends; [...] On examining my little patient I found him nearly dead, exhibiting all the symptoms of an overdose of opium. However, for over an hour we worked away, washing out the child's stomach [...] and gradually the little patient showed signs of recovery. When he had come completely round and was crying vigorously, there was great rejoicing. Thinking the opportunity too good a one to be lost, I asked my assistant to tell the father that God had heard prayer and restored him his child, and that we would like him to join with us and thank God [...] Although the father was a *mullah*, and had the reputation of being very fanatical in his hatred of Christians, he

²⁷ Hume-Griffith, *op.cit.*, p.140.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.146.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.146-48.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

at once consented to our proposition, announcing to the crowd our intention. During the short thanksgiving prayer every head was bowed and not a sound of protest heard, while Christian and Moslem alike returned thanks to the great God who had heard and answered prayer. Medical Missions had once again won a triumph over Moslem fanaticism, and the scowls and threatening looks which had greeted our arrival were replaced by cordial thanks and vehement expressions of gratitude!³¹

Although it is certainly believable that Dr Hume-Griffith experienced difficulties in being accepted by the population, as S. Mahdavi points out, the end of the previous passage evidences that his strong insistence on Muslim fanaticism, and the frequent negative descriptions of it he provides, stemmed from his Christian background and were probably over-emphasized on the purpose of endorsing the evangelical aims of medical missions. Moreover, these hints at fanaticism can also be the consequence of cultural clash, that is to say the difficulty in understanding certain aspects of a different culture and, consequently, perceiving them in a distorted way, filtered through the codes of one's own culture. For example, in the aforementioned episode of the procession for the Imam Hussein, Gertrude Bell was upset by the Persian Muslims' show of grief, which she perceived as theatrical and annoying. Furthermore, she noticed a dervish reciting prayers among that wailing crowd, and describes him as "a wild figure, with eyes in which flashed the madness of religious fanaticism".³² Bell probably uses the word "fanaticism" to describe a religious phenomenon which differed from the religious practices to which she was accustomed in her Anglican-Christian culture, and, therefore, she could not understand.

Another aspect which is present both in Bell's and in Dr Hume-Griffith's travel account is the negative opinion about Persian traditional doctors and medicine. As far as Bell is concerned, she blames Persian doctors for hastily leaving Teheran during the cholera epidemic, while they should have stayed and "distribute medicines among the sufferers".³³ On

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp.158-59.

³² Bell, *Persian Pictures*, cit., p.27.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.34.

the contrary, she praises missionaries, in particular American missionaries, who took care of the population.³⁴ Regarding Dr Hume-Griffith, he provides several anecdotes concerning the deficiencies of Persian traditional medicine, which is described as “very simple, dating back to the time of Hippocrates”,³⁵ and Persian doctors who employ this medicine, who are referred to with the derogatory word “quacks”:

all diseases are divided into two classes—hot and cold—to be treated accordingly with hot and cold remedies. All foods are similarly classified. With this knowledge, plus a few Persian medical books and an appropriate turban, the native quack sets up as a doctor. His impudence and native wit are inexhaustible; he will cheer his patients with extracts from Hafiz or Firdousi (the great Persian poets), talk learnedly of vapours, and have a specific for every mortal ailment. The quack physician is amusing and probably confines himself to fairly harmless compounds; but the Persian surgeon is a man to be avoided at all costs.³⁶

However, he honestly admits that, besides these traditional doctors, there are many good Persian doctors who are trained in Teheran medical school and also in Europe.³⁷ As has been remarked before for fanaticism, Dr Hume-Griffith’s insistence on the ineptitude of Persian traditional doctors may also conceal his desire to emphasize the important contribution of European doctors to improving the health of the Persian population. It is undeniable that Western medicine was already more advanced than other traditional medical practices at that time and medical missionaries certainly wished to help those in need, as S. Mahdavi highlights, but it is equally true that it was a powerful means for the British to enter Persian society and legitimate their presence. Nevertheless, despite these controversial points, Dr Hume-Griffith seems sincerely attached to the Persians, and at the end of his account, when he deals with his departure from Persia in 1903, he expresses his and his wife’s grief “at

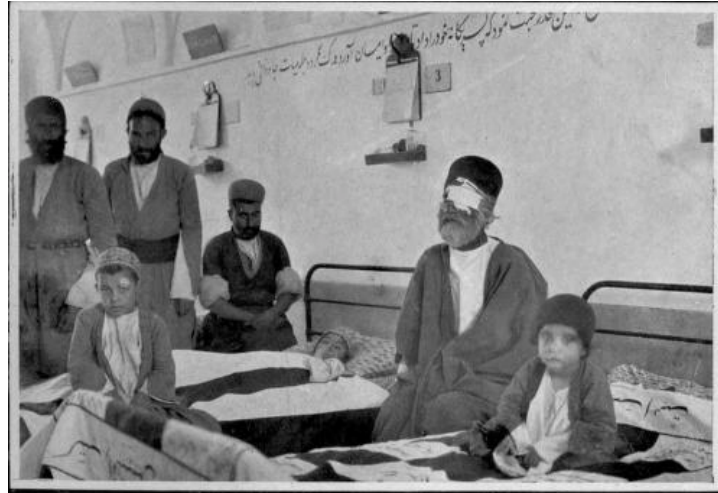
³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Hume-Griffith, *op.cit.*, p.159.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.160.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

having to leave a country and people that we had learnt to love, and amongst whom we had hoped to spend our lives”.³⁸



11. A ward in the Julfa hospital, Isfahan

Mrs Hume-Griffith: journeys, landscape, women and religion.

Unlike her husband, Mrs Hume-Griffith does not only focus on medical missionary work in his travel account, but on other aspects concerning the life they led in Persia, particularly the places they visited and the people they met. She herself provides both anecdotes and personal considerations on her experiences. At the beginning, in the first chapter, she seems victim of the exotic image of Persia which affected Gertrude Bell and other travellers, when she confesses the joy which she felt in knowing that she and her husband would travel to “the romantic land of Persia”.³⁹ However, her account is not conditioned by this fairy-tale vision of this country, and shortly after she refers to Persia as a

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.169.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.17.

“land of light and darkness”,⁴⁰ which means that her adventures there made her conscious of the fact that Persia, like all the other countries in the world, was characterized by both outstanding and controversial aspects, the latter mainly referring to the condition of women. Mrs Hume-Griffith offers precise accounts on Persian transport, industries, especially the popular carpet manufacturing, agriculture, and detailed descriptions of various social features of the cities and villages which she visited, but she chiefly insists on two aspects, that is to say landscape and people, particularly women, which is also proved by the subtitle of her travel book: *An Account of an Englishwoman's Eight Years' Residence amongst the Women of the East*.

As far as landscape is concerned, she was impressed, as Gertrude Bell was, by the contrast between flourishing nature and aridity, which still characterizes Iran. When she arrived in Persia from the fertile region of the Caspian Sea, she was welcomed by a profusion of flowers and trees which she had not expected and reminded her of the English landscape she was accustomed to:

always having thought of Persia as a very dry, parched land, our surprise was very great on reaching Resht, the port on the Caspian, to see such lovely forests of trees, and flowers in abundance, both wild and cultivated. Primroses, anemones, periwinkles, cyclamen, and many other kinds of flowers, all were in bloom as we drove through Resht on our way to Isphahan. The ferns, too, were splendid, maiden-hair and ox-tongue being especially beautiful. With all these homelike flowers and ferns around us, we could hardly realize that we were not driving through some dear Devonshire lane in Old England.⁴¹

However, when she and her husband arrived in Teheran, the landscape changed and Persia revealed its mountainous and arid nature, which increased when they travelled southward, firstly to Isfahan and, the following years, to Kerman and Yezd, where the scenery mainly

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.18.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp.50-51.

consists of the expanse of the desert.⁴² Nonetheless, near Teheran, as well as on other journeys throughout central and southern Persia, she had the opportunity of appreciating the famous Persian gardens.⁴³ As she clearly explains, the reason for the changes in landscape is the considerable height above sea-level which characterizes Iran, except for the regions of the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, and renders this country “a high plateau land”.⁴⁴ This variety obviously affects the climate, which is more humid in the Caspian region and increasingly dry, or even unbearably hot, according to the seasons, as one travels southward.⁴⁵ When the weather became too hot in Isfahan, Kerman or Yezd, she relates that she and her husband left the cities and went on holiday for some weeks to “pretty and fairly cool places in the plains”.⁴⁶

She seems to have been particularly struck by the desert, to which she dedicates an entire chapter, “Desert Delights”. She diffusely deals with the main practical features of travelling in the desert, such as transport, accommodation and hardships, but at the beginning of the chapter she indulges in an evocative and suggestive description of the desert which reveals all her fascination for a scenery in which she felt the presence of God:

to a lover of the desert a journey across its boundless tracts is always full of interest and delight. It is strange what an attraction the desert has for some people, and stranger still is the fact that this magnetic power increases as time passes [...] And any one who has once heard the call of the desert is always longing to answer that call, and to fly once more, as a needle to its magnet, to that great, wondrous world. For it *is* a world of its own, this great, boundless ocean of sand—a world altogether different from any other part of God’s earth. [...] no one can live and travel in the desert without feeling the majestic Presence of God. Everything speaks of Him, the great sea of sand, the flowers springing into blossom at His word, the tiny lizard darting across your path, and other countless creatures, all finding life and sustenance in the desert, each telling of the wonderful Creator who watches over and cares for all.⁴⁷

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp.51-52.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.51.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.50-58, *passim*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.61.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.130-31.

Therefore, the desert is seen by Mrs Hume-Griffith under a spiritual light, which is certainly a sign of her profound faith, which she expresses in other passages of her travel book, but it is also the effect of the immense and essential nature of the desert. It is significant that the Italian writer Alberto Moravia perceived the same spiritual essence in the Sahara desert, which he describes in *Lettere dal Sahara* as a metaphysical place, which, with its eternal uniformity, can be a source of life for the traveller, unlike the frenetic movement of the city, which is a cause of spiritual death.⁴⁸ According to Moravia, “il viaggio nel Sahara è un viaggio fuori del tempo o meglio in un tempo storico di tipo religioso”,⁴⁹ and the desert is the ideal place for the spirit.⁵⁰

Besides landscape, Mrs Hume-Griffith pays considerable attention to Persian people. She describes her servants, among whom was a woman called Bagi, and portrays the Persians as courteous, “clever and artistic”,⁵¹ but also shows a tendency to generalize some prejudiced opinions. For example, she relates that she was frequently cheated by Persian servants, and this made her “sceptical about the possibility of a native speaking the truth”,⁵² which is an evident process of generalization that often affects travellers on their encounter with different cultural codes, but is obviously a tendentious way of dealing with another culture. As far as people are concerned, Mrs Hume-Griffith appears to be particularly concerned with Persian Muslim women. She accounts for their curiosity about her during their meetings, which frequently brought them to ask her questions that sometimes she perceived as indiscreet.⁵³ She also deals with customs and cultural issues related to women, such as their indoor and outdoor dresses,⁵⁴ wedding feasts and make-up, highlighting that

⁴⁸ A. Moravia, *Lettere dal Sahara*, Bompiani, Milano, 1981, in F. Wolfzettel, “Il Nordafrica come paesaggio esistenziale dell’io: per un esempio di viaggio del Novecento”, in D’Agostini, *op.cit.*, pp.270-71.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.270.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.271.

⁵¹ Hume-Griffith, *op.cit.*, p.47.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.78.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.85.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.95-97.

“Persian ladies are great beauty specialists, and bestow a good deal of attention upon their complexion and general make-up”.⁵⁵ Besides these cultural features, what seems to strike her most is the condition of Muslim women in contrast with men, particularly their husbands. She frequently expresses her grief for these women, the majority of whom, she states, lead a miserable life, despite few exceptions, because they are treated by their husbands “as downtrodden, degraded beings”⁵⁶ and have to share the *anderoon*, that is to say the female quarter of a house, with other wives. She provides the example of a young wife who was brought to the medical mission to be cured, because her husband had set fire to her body, after repeatedly mistreating her.⁵⁷ Unfortunately she died and Mrs Hume-Griffith describes her as “a martyr indeed to the creed of Islam, which enables and allows men to treat their women as something lower than the beasts of the field”.⁵⁸

Another problem for Persian Muslim women was their relationship with the other wives of their husband, which caused jealousy and hostilities, even if Mrs Hume-Griffith accounts for the existence of some happy *anderoons*.⁵⁹ As a woman, she must have spontaneously identified with women, and many Muslim practices, such as male polygamy and female subordination and limitations, must have been difficult to accept by a Western Christian woman. However, sometimes her remarks on other aspects of Islam seem to be filtered through and influenced by her strong religious faith and Christian background, and result in veiled criticism. For example, when she describes the main features of Islam, she also deals with the Muslims’ duty to pray more times a day, and concludes by suggesting that these compulsory prayers are ineffective: “[he] begins to repeat his prayers [...] till the duty is finished, when he returns to his work, perhaps to his cheating and his lying, for this repetition

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.104.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.102-3.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.103.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.88-89.

of prayers has no effect on his life or manner of living”.⁶⁰ This difficulty in treating Islam impartially is evident in another episode concerning a passion play for the Imam Hussein, and what she exclaims about this performance, which was described also by Gertrude Bell, clearly summarizes the influence of religion which characterized Mrs Hume-Griffith’s approach to some aspects of her travel experience:

the shouting and yelling of the fanatical mob, all contributed to the making up of one of the most notable scenes of Eastern life. And yet it made one’s heart ache to watch this crowd of human beings for whom Christ died, and who as yet know nothing of Him, but are only anxious to obtain merit for themselves by taking part in these gruesome religious performances.⁶¹

Although religious clash is not the only feature of Mrs Hume-Griffith’s travel account, which, as has been shown, is rich in interesting remarks on several Persian issues, it is a suggestive example of how travellers’ gaze can be influenced by their culture and beliefs, or, in Dr Hume-Griffith’s case, by the reasons which lie behind their travels.



12. Persian women in outdoor dress

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.107.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.112.

3d. Wives of ministers and diplomats: Vita Sackville-West

As explained in chapter 3b, a large number of the British travellers who visited Persia between the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century were diplomats, consuls or ministers. If they had families, sometimes their wives left with them and permanently resided in Persia, such as Percy Sykes's wife Evelyn,¹ while other wives remained at home and occasionally travelled to Persia in order to pay a visit to their husbands, and took advantage of this opportunity to visit this foreign and far-away country. This is the case of the famous writer and intellectual Vita Sackville-West (1892-1962), whose husband, Harold Nicolson, was a counsellor in Teheran, as I already mentioned. She journeyed to Persia twice, the first time in 1926 and the second time in 1927. Her Persian travels are remarkably described in two different travel books, *Passenger to Teheran* and *Twelve Days in Persia*, as well as in the many letters which she wrote from Persia to her close friend and lover Virginia Woolf.



13. Friends in Isfahan, captioned by Vita: (back row) Raymond Mortimer, Mrs Bristow, Gladwyn Jebb; (front row) Vita, Harold, Captain Wickham

¹ Wynn, *op.cit.*, p.107.

Passenger to Teheran, published in 1927 by Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press,² is a short travel book which relates Vita's first journey to and across Persia, from January to May 1926. She reached Persia by land from the Iraqi frontier, travelling by car, or "motor", as she calls it, and servants. The journey from the frontier to Teheran, across Kermanshah, was not easy because of the snow which covered the mountain passes, so that "the road was simply a lane cut between ramparts of snow, twenty feet high"³ but she finally reached Teheran, where she resided at the British Legation. She did not like the capital, which she describes as "a squalid city"⁴ with bad roads, but appreciated its bazaars and the beautiful country around Teheran. During this first journey in Persia, Vita had also the opportunity of visiting Isfahan, where she observed the famous Persian carpet manufacturing, and Kum, which she really enjoyed. As far as *Twelve Days in Persia* is concerned, it was published in 1928 by the Hogarth Press, and deals with Vita's second journey in Persia, which consisted of a brief stay in Isfahan and an adventurous journey on mules across the mountainous Bakhtiari Country, where she could observe nomad tribes. Both travel books are short, provided with photographs and endowed with a subjective tone and refined style, especially *Passenger to Teheran*, which could be considered a novel more than a travel book. An example concerning her first journey across Persia may be useful to illustrate Vita Sackville-West's sophisticated writing:

we met little donkeys, coming down, stepping delicately, and camels, swaying down on their soft padded feet. Looking up, we could see the whole road of the pass zigzagging up the cliff-side, populous with animals and shouting, thrashing men. Looking back, as we climbed, we could see the immense prospect of the plain stretching away behind us. A savage, desolating country! but one that filled me with extraordinary elation. I had never seen anything that pleased me so well as these Persian uplands, with their enormous views, clear light and rocky grandeur. This was, in detail, in actuality, the region labelled "Persia" on the maps. Let me be aware, I said;

² Virginia Woolf referred to *Passenger to Teheran* in enthusiastic terms: "It's awfully good... I didn't know the extent of your subtleties... not the sly, brooding, thinking, evading Vita. The whole book is full of nooks and crannies, the very intimate things one says in print", in Sackville-West, *Passenger to Teheran*, cit., pp.21-22.

³ *Ibid.*, p.72.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.77.

let me savour every mile of the way. But there were too many miles, and [...] it is only the general horizon that I remember [...] This question of horizon, however; how important it is; how it alters the shape of the mind; how it expresses, essentially, one's ultimate sense of country! That is what can never be told in words: the exact size, proportion, contour; the new standard to which the mind must adjust itself.⁵

In both travel books there is an abundance of similar passages which express Vita's passion and enthusiasm for travel, both as a source of stimulating experiences and discoveries, and as an escape from diplomatic life, which she overtly disliked. Her travel books and letters are scattered with references to her intolerance of the formalities which characterized British diplomatic world in Teheran, and of the people who belonged to this world, mainly diplomats and their wives. She could hardly stand formal dinners and meetings, with their artificial politeness and boring conversations, which certainly proved to be sterile for a woman who was accustomed to interesting cultural intercourses with the acute members of the Bloomsbury Group, among whom were intellectuals and artists such as Virginia Woolf and Edward Morgan Forster. Vita recalls dinner parties "one of them indistinguishable from the other",⁶ and criticizes the Europeans in Persia who "go on with their tea-parties, and their leaving of cards, and their speculations as to why some one was not to be seen, yesterday, at some one else's house".⁷ However, sometimes diplomatic life afforded some interesting adventures, among which the most remarkable was the coronation of Shah Reza Pahlavi, in 1926, which Vita attended and even contributed to organizing.⁸ She describes in detail the coronation ceremony, which caused the arrival of a large number of diplomats and tribal representatives in Teheran, and a considerable display of luxury, with Persian carpets hung

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.69.

⁶ V. Sackville-West, *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*, London, Cornerstone, 1984, p.202.

⁷ Sackville-West, *Passenger to Teheran*, cit., p.92.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.123-42.

everywhere across the city, which “became a city of texture, like a great and sumptuous tent open to the sky”.⁹

Nevertheless, her principal interest was undoubtedly travelling and observing Persian life, especially the life of common people, in opposition to the arid and repetitive intercourse which characterized diplomatic life, even if she is conscious that an inevitable cultural barrier lies between her and the natives:

how wonderful and perplexing is this system of social intercourse! These people are not friends; they do not, they cannot, enjoy one another’s society; there is no intimacy, no truth between them; [...] The problem is beyond me; I give it up, and stand aside to marvel. For, personally, I prefer the bazaars to the drawing-rooms; not that I cherish any idea that I am seeing “the life of the people”; no foreigner can ever do that, although some talk a great deal of nonsense about it; but I like to look. It is a harmless taste, and disturbs nobody except myself.¹⁰

She liked to look and she certainly liked to travel, which she describes as “the most private of pleasures”,¹¹ because the strong emotions which accompany a travel experience are difficult to convey through writing or words, and acquire their full sense if they are experienced. Of course this does not prevent her from providing interesting reflections on travel, aiming at grasping the essence of travelling and conveying it to the reader. For example, she deals with the confusion which derives from the clash between the traveller’s native background and the new exalting experiences in the foreign country, so that she herself felt as if she were living two lives at the same time: “what am I? and where am I? That is the problem: and where is my heart, home-sick at one moment, excited beyond reason the next? But at least I live, I feel [...]”.¹² The direct questions clearly attempt at creating a direct link with readers, in order to make them partake of her travel experiences, which are identified with life itself. Moreover, Vita felt completely satisfied when the journey was adventurous. For example, during her first

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.125.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.92.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.25.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.96.

journey, she travelled to Isfahan “after the Persian fashion, independent of food and even, at a pinch, of lodging, with camp bed and blankets”,¹³ which, however hard, gave her a satisfying “sense of freedom” and essentiality in contrast with the superfluous materials which characterized her ordinary life.¹⁴

Vita herself appears to be particularly attracted to Iranian landscape, as nearly all travellers in Persia were. In *Passenger to Teheran* she mentions Persian gardens and is impressed by the contrast between the greenness of gardens and “the enormous geographical simplicity that lies beyond”,¹⁵ meaning the stony mountainous and hilly extensions characterizing the Iranian plateau, which is described as “a great, wide roof” from where the traveller can enjoy a unique “sense of openness”.¹⁶ This geographical simplicity is what fascinated her most both in the first and in the second journey, when she travelled across the desolate mountains of the Bakhtiari Country, where she was overwhelmed by a sense of isolation and solitude, which she defines as anachronistic for a woman who was used to a modern urban environment.¹⁷ What distinguishes Vita’s description of Iranian landscape from those of other travellers is her suggestive insistence on colours, particularly brown, the colour of the mountains and the desert, which was a recurrent feature of all her journeys across Persia. She shows her attention for colours since her first arrival in Persia, when she describes the “typically Persian” landscape which welcomed her on her way to Kermanshah: “snow mountains in the distance, on the rim of the plain, blue and white; foothills nearer at hand, like north-country fells, tawny in the curious, intense light, tawny through every shade of brown, from yellow through ochre to burnt umber”.¹⁸ Again, during a journey from Teheran to Isfahan, she arrived in a region where “all was brown and blue; brown plain, brown village,

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.98.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.99.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.87.

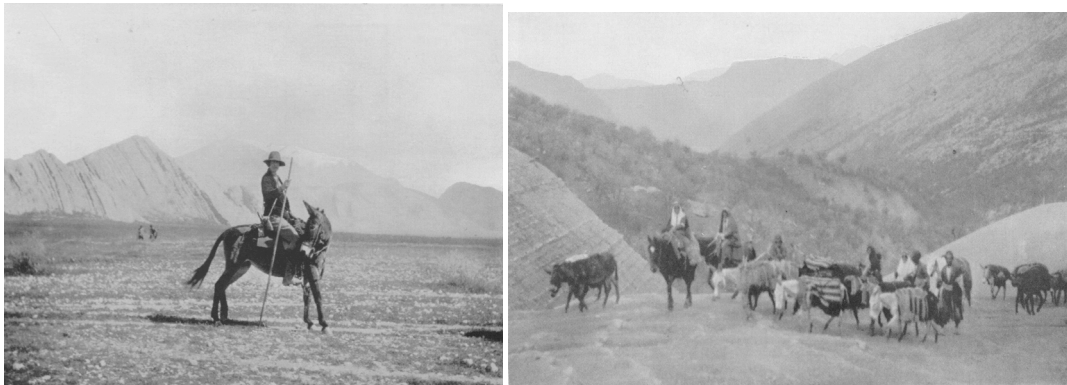
¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.77.

¹⁷ Sackville-West, *Twelve Days in Persia*, cit., p.90.

¹⁸ Sackville-West, *Passenger to Teheran*, cit., p.72.

blue sky, and in the distance blue hills faintly streaked with snow”.¹⁹ The word “brown” is repeated many other times both in *Passenger to Teheran* and *Twelve Days in Persia*, not only in reference to natural elements, but also to buildings and people, testifying to her fascination for this colour, which she openly expresses in an outstanding passage:

but best of all I like the dun-coloured shops where they sell grain, so harmonious and sober in their tonality. The brass scales gleam among the pyramidal heaps of grain; brown ochre, fawn, neutral, with twine and sacking, and brown men scooping up the wheat in wooden measures. I cannot think of the east as gaudy, but always as brown: earth, and dark skins, the colour of age.²⁰



14. Vita Sackville-West across the Bakhtiari Country

Cultural clash and exoticism

Despite the profound and sincere love for Persia which transpires from Vita Sackville-West’s accounts on her travels, there were times when she felt upset or annoyed by

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.104.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.93.

certain aspects of Persian life which she could not understand or accept, because of the obvious cultural barrier that prevents most travellers from grasping the whole of a foreign culture. For example, sometimes she had some difficulties in getting accustomed to the slowness which characterized the Persians' approach to life, because, as she explains, "to the Persian mind it is not only rude but incomprehensible to be in a hurry".²¹ This feature was detected also by Mrs Hume-Griffith, who complains about her servants who were always late with travel preparations, and says "Persians are never in a hurry".²² This must have been hard to accept by these British women who were used to living in a frenetic over-mechanized atmosphere. Moreover, although Vita affirms that during her stay she aimed at looking at Persia without being conditioned by its political and social problems,²³ sometimes she cannot avoid commenting on some aspects which necessarily resulted inadequate to a modern English woman, such as transport difficulties and inefficient and corrupt administration, which contributed to "the shabby condition of everything in this ramshackle country".²⁴ However, her gaze was not blurred by cultural differences, because she always managed to reflect on what she saw, and was conscious of the fact that each country has its own singularity and travellers have to adjust to the reality which hosts them even when it clashes with their own background:

no doubt there is much that is irritating in Persia; it is irritating not to be able to get a broken blind repaired, or to buy a piece of glass without a bubble in it; irritating to be so much at the mercy of nature in the shape of snow, flood, and mud, impeding our journeys, delaying our posts, and generally interrupting our communications; irritating to see the universal wastage and decay; irritating to hear of corruption and peculation with the elaborate and wearisome system that they involve; but Asia is not Europe, and all countries bestow different gifts. Resignation is essential here, if one does not wish to live in a condition of perpetual fury. Then, having emptied the mind of European preconceptions, one is at liberty to turn round and absorb an entirely new set of conditions.²⁵

²¹ Sackville-West, *Twelve Days in Persia*, cit., p.59.

²² Hume-Griffith, *op.cit.*, p.60.

²³ Sackville-West, *Passenger to Teheran*, cit., p.104.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.129.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.91-92.

Therefore, she seems to suggest that travellers in Persia should learn and acquire the same sense of “resignation” which she observed, and also criticized, in the natives’ “lax limp”²⁶ attitude to life, which Gertrude Bell labelled as “Oriental fatalism”.²⁷

Nevertheless, sometimes she is herself victim of instinctive distorted judgments and generalizations, deriving from an inclination to consider Persian culture through the lens of her own background. For example, in *Passenger to Teheran* she bitterly criticizes the Persians’ mistreatment of animals, which are used as means of transport and constrained to endure terrible efforts that often cause their death. Her sincere fondness for animals brought her to be particularly upset by what she perceived as acts of cruelty caused by ignorance, because “it is not that these people are cruel, but that they are ignorant. [...] the Persians are gentle by inclination [...] But they seem to be ignorant of suffering”.²⁸ Moreover, she adds that this ignorant cruelty was also extended to suffering people, as “it is no uncommon sight to see a man lying on the pavement, vomiting blood or dying of starvation, while all pass him by”.²⁹ As far as people are concerned, she was certainly shocked by some crude street scenes which she observed during her stay, and on this traveller’s limited gaze she understandably based her considerations on natives’ behaviour towards suffering, while, regarding animals, her indignation for their ill treatment made it difficult for her to adjust to a reality where animals were used for practical purposes and not like pets, as in her urban industrialized background.

Vita’s gaze on Persia was not only conditioned by cultural clash, but also by clichés and exoticism. First of all, she frequently associates Persia, or the Orient in general, with romantic attributes deriving from the *Arabian Nights* tradition. Therefore, in her travel

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.128.

²⁷ Bell, *Persian Pictures*, cit., p.33.

²⁸ Sackville-West, *Passenger to Teheran*, cit., p.79.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.80.

books and letters it is common to find the adjective “romantic” in expressions such as “romantic names”,³⁰ “romantic life of forgotten centuries”³¹ or “romantical place”.³² Furthermore, there is an eloquent passage from one of Vita’s letters to Virginia Woolf which probably provides the most significant example of the romantic inclination that affected Vita in her travel writings. This passage relates the day when Vita had the opportunity of seeing the Crown jewels, during her first visit in Persia, an opportunity which also Gertrude Bell had.³³ Vita was so bewildered by what she observed that she wrote a postscript as soon as she returned from this visit, and this instantaneous postscript reveals all her amazement, despite the observation that all this luxury was inserted in an incongruous context which represented reality as a counterpart to the enchantment:

just back from the palace, with ½ an hour before the bag shuts. I am blind. Blinded by diamonds. I have been in Aladdin’s cave. Sacks of emerald were emptied out before our eyes. Sacks of pearls. *Literally*. We came away shaking the pearls out of our shoes. Ropes of uncut emeralds. Scabbards encrusted with precious stones. Great hieratic crowns. All this in a squalid room, with grubby Persians drinking little cups of tea. I can’t write about it now. It was simply the Arabian Nights, with décor by the Sitwells. Pure fantasy. Oh, *why* weren’t you there?³⁴

As far as exoticism is concerned, it is generated by travellers’ encounter with realities which do not characterize their own culture and world, and which they often endow with exciting features that they do not possess in themselves but only in contrast with the travellers’ own background. As Vita Sackville-West admirably highlights: “to us, who come from Europe, there is something poetic in a Persian shepherd calling to his goats and sheep; but the Persian shepherd himself sees nothing except the everyday business of getting a lot of tiresome animals along”.³⁵ Brill points out that nomads have always represented a fascinating

³⁰ Sackville-West, *Twelve Days in Persia*, cit., p.81.

³¹ Sackville-West, *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*, cit., p.206.

³² *Ibid.*, p.208.

³³ Bell, *Persian Pictures*, cit., pp.53-58.

³⁴ Sackville-West, *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*, cit., pp.132-33.

³⁵ Sackville-West, *Twelve Days in Persia*, cit., p.66.

phenomenon for Western travellers in the Orient,³⁶ and can be said to symbolize a sort of “exotic inside the exotic”, because they were an extraordinary element inside a reality, that is to say the Orient, which was itself astonishing for Western travellers. Vita Sackville-West could come into contact with Bakhtiari nomads when she travelled across the Bakhtiari Country, during her second journey in Persia. She was extremely satisfied with leaving for this adventure, and got prepared for the journey by reading written materials on the Bakhtiaris, such as Layard’s famous account. She journeyed on mules with some fellow travellers, among whom was her husband Harold, and, despite the obvious hardships of an itinerant journey, she enjoyed camping, travelling across villages, nomad camps and mountain passes: “the love of Persia filled my heart again, at the sight of her high solitudes [...] I rejoiced, as always, in this empty, unfurnished landscape”.³⁷ When she met the Bakhtiaris during her exploration, she was fascinated by these nomads whom she describes as proud and independent,³⁸ and was amazed at their cyclical movements from plains to mountains and vice versa according to the seasons, and at the primitiveness of their life, unbound from modernity and attached to nature, so that “they still seemed an integral part of the country”.³⁹ However, she is conscious of the fact that what seems an exotic and exciting life to her and other Western travellers is actually a constant effort to survive, a “struggle for mere existence”.⁴⁰ And at this point she reveals her acute capacity of understanding the processes of the human mind, which frequently characterizes her reflexions on travel in her travel accounts, since she provides an interesting explanation of exoticism which was meant to be useful for all travellers and can deservingly conclude the issue of travel in the Orient, and Persia:

since romance is the reality of somewhere else or of some other period, here, on the Bakhtiari Road, this truth is doubly applicable. Persia is certainly somewhere else, and a long way, too, in relation to England, and this

³⁶ Brill, *op.cit.*, pp.150-51.

³⁷ Sackville-West, *Twelve Days in Persia*, cit., p.28.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.65.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.77.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.65.

Biblical form of existence certainly belongs to a period other than the twentieth century—it is an anachronism in our eyes, and therefore romantic.⁴¹

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.66.

Conclusion

As I have tried to demonstrate, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the increasing British economic and political expansion gave travel a strong impulse, which resulted in a huge number of British citizens travelling to foreign countries for a wide range of reasons, either diplomatic and professional, or just for pleasure. The direct consequence of this phenomenon was an increase in the amount of British travel books published throughout these two centuries, passing from voluminous and informative writings for most of the nineteenth century to short and more subjective works from the beginning of the twentieth, when much of the world was known and travellers felt legitimated to focus on more personal aspects of their journeys. One of the most popular destinations among travellers was the Orient, which at that time used to indicate the Ottoman Empire and the territories to the west of India, which began to be known as “Middle East” since the beginning of the twentieth century. These Eastern lands were particularly fascinating for British, and Western, travellers, because they had been associated for a long time with the mysterious and exciting world of the *Arabian Nights*, which had influenced the image of the Orient in the Western mind. Moreover, these territories were also important for the British for imperialistic reasons, as a platform for their diplomatic and economic interests. This intertwinement of imaginary and political issues in British attitude towards the Orient has been defined as “Orientalism”.

We have seen that Iran, or Persia, as it was called until 1935, is a significant example of this mixture of political and exotic motives. From the nineteenth century, the British Empire started to exercise an increasing influence into Persian affairs because Persia was an important strategic buffer to protect India, but it was also a centre for British trade and a source of economic interests, which mainly concerned oil, especially from the beginning of the twentieth century. These increasingly close political relations between the British Empire and Persia resulted in a large amount of British travellers who visited this country and wrote accounts on their journeys, which contributed to spreading the knowledge of Persia in Great

Britain. Nineteenth-century travellers such as Henry Layard, Edward Browne and the diplomat Lord Curzon wrote travel books which became real landmarks for later travellers.

Furthermore, the last decade of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century constituted a particularly intense period for Anglo-Persian relations and for Persian history, characterized by a constitutional revolution, military turmoil and the passage from the Qajar dynasty to the Pahlavi dynasty. As we have seen, a wide range of British travellers visited and resided in Persia for different reasons between the 1890s and the 1920s, and subsequently reported their experiences into travel books. We have met Gertrude Bell, who travelled to Persia for pleasure; Sir Percy Sykes, whose travels were motivated by diplomatic affairs; Mrs Hume-Griffith, who went to Persia with her husband, who was a missionary doctor; finally, the writer Vita Sackville-West, who travelled to Persia twice in order to pay visits to her husband, Harold Nicolson, and visit the country. All these travellers convey their personal experiences and their vision of Persia in their travel accounts, according to the reasons which brought them there and what they had the opportunity of seeing and doing, but all pay particular attention to certain aspects and present common features.

Gertrude Bell travelled to Persia in 1892 and spent her time journeying across the region around Teheran, visiting villages and riding across the desert. Her Persian travel account, *Safar Nameh. Persian Pictures*, is a significant testimony of her Persian travel experiences and emotions. As we have seen, this travel book consists of twenty chapters, each one dealing with a particular episode concerning Bell's travels, and is characterized by a refined and subjective style, which, according to critics, commonly characterized female travel writing between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, in contrast with the more matter-of-fact and scientific approach of male travel accounts. Both the subjective style, rich in sophisticated images and suggestive speculations, and the fragmentary structure of this travel account prove that Bell's aim is not to provide a study on Persia or a detailed account of

her journeys, but to convey to the reader some sketches of what struck her most during her Persian stay. As I have demonstrated, she was particularly attracted to the multifaceted Iranian landscape, of which she provides a long series of inspired descriptions, with a special attention to the saving greenness of the Iranian gardens which abruptly sprang up from the arid wilderness. Her approach to and fascination for Persia is characterized by a tendency to identify Persia with the Orient, so that she frequently extends some features she observed in Persia to a wider and uniform “East”. Moreover, she manifests an alternation between exotic fancies connected to the idea of a romantic Orient and disillusioned observations about the reality which surrounded her in Persia, which was characterized by aspects that her own background made difficult for her to understand. As a matter of fact, she often expresses her difficulty in grasping the whole meaning of some phenomena or incidents, such as nomadic life or the passion play which she observed during the month of Muharram, when her difficulty of understanding was accompanied by a sense of uneasiness.

As far as Sir Percy Sykes is concerned, he travelled to Persia several times between the 1890s and the 1910s because of diplomatic affairs. About his Persian travels he wrote articles for *The Geographical Journal* and a voluminous travel book, *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*, which deals with Sykes’s journeys in Persia between 1893 and 1901, when he was charged to open consulates in Kerman and Sistan. As I have explained, his travel account is characterized by a factual style, and alternates long digressions on historical, social and political issues about Persia to the description of Sykes’s explorations across the country. This considerable attention to the socio-political situation of Persia is certainly the consequence of Sykes’s diplomatic involvement in the country, which obviously conditioned his gaze. His travel book is rich in information about his diplomatic commitments and the British and Persian officials he met during his journeys. However, the most significant aspect of *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*, and of Sykes’s writings for *The Geographical Journal* as well, is his passion for exploration and interest in Iranian landscape. He scrupulously

describes his explorations across Persia, mainly the south-eastern region, with precise details about both physical and psychological travel hardships, tracks, villages and geographical and natural features. He also takes into account Persian people, whom he appreciated for their courtesy, and sometimes describes his encounters with tribal chiefs and villagers, but he does not indulge in full and detailed accounts of them. He pays more considerable attention to the material, physical and professional factors involved in his explorations with an overall neutral tone, reserving little space to the feelings which characterized his travels.

Regarding Mrs Hume-Griffith, she travelled to Persia with her husband, who was charged to open a medical mission in Kerman by the Church Missionary Society. They resided in Persia from 1900 to 1903, and stayed each year in a different city, in order Isfahan, Kerman and Yezd, according to Dr Hume-Griffith's professional commitments. After these years in Persia, they travelled to the Ottoman territories. Mrs Hume-Griffith wrote a travel book on her Persian and Turkish experiences, *Behind the Veil in Persia and Turkish Arabia*, the first part of which is entirely focussed on Persia. As we have seen, it deals with Mrs Hume-Griffith's travel memories except for the three last chapters, which were written by Dr Hume-Griffith and relates his medical vicissitudes. He provides anecdotes about his medical actions in the three Persian cities where he operated, and constitutes an interesting insight in the activities of a category of British citizens who visited Persia at the time, that is to say missionary doctors. He deals with the hostility and diffidence of Persian priests towards Western medicine and doctors and insistently criticizes Persian traditional doctors, contrasting them with the efficient philanthropic action of medical missions. Sometimes his insistence on what he defines as Muslim fanaticism seems a consequence of the clash between his strong Christian background and a completely different and opposed Muslim context. As far as Mrs Hume-Griffith's travel account is concerned, it is characterized by an intertwinement of personal travel anecdotes and reflexions on certain aspects of Persian culture and society, such as industry, craft and religion. This last aspect seems to interest her most, especially as

far as Muslim women are concerned. She dedicates entire chapters to the situation of Persian Muslim women, commenting on polygamy and the ill treatment of which these women are often victim on the part of their husbands. As for her husband, Mrs Hume-Griffith looked at Persia through the filter of her strong Christian faith, due to the missionary context they belonged to. Her involvement in religion also appears in her descriptions of the Iranian desert, which particularly fascinated her and where she felt the presence of God.

As far as Vita Sackville-West is concerned, she went to Persia twice, the first time in 1926 when she visited Teheran, Isfahan and Kum, and the second time in 1927, when she journeyed on mules across the Bakhtiari Mountains with her husband and other travellers. She wrote two short travel books, one for each journey, that is to say *Passenger to Teheran* and *Twelve Days in Persia*, together with many letters to Virginia Woolf. As I have described, both her travel books are characterized by an extremely refined style rich in inspired images and speculations. As for the other travellers, she herself appears interested in Iranian landscape and enjoyed journeying across the country, which she considered an exciting alternative to diplomatic life, to which she frequently refers in negative and bored terms. She looked at Persia with the same intertwinement of exotic amazement and cultural clash which characterizes Gertrude Bell's travel account, but Vita seems particularly aware of the processes of her mind and her accounts are scattered with reflections on her travel experience, but also on travel in general. Her modern industrial background made her look at certain aspects of Persian society with annoyance, and she is conscious of the fact that this reaction is common in travellers who clash against a different culture, but it must not prevent them from enjoying their travel experience and the country they are visiting. As a matter of fact, she claims that an act of conscious resignation to the host country on the part of travellers is the necessary preliminary condition to take real pleasure from travelling.

The analysis of these five travel books has provided an interesting insight into travel writing as a literary genre. First of all, they confirm what critics point out about the degree of objective straightforwardness and subjective sophistication which differentiates male and female travelogues. As a matter of fact, while Sykes's travel book and Dr Hume-Griffith's short account are more focussed on factual information and descriptions, Mrs Hume-Griffith's and, most of all, Gertrude Bell's and Vita Sackville-West's works are characterized by stylistic refinement and frequent references to the author's feelings and personal thoughts. This does not mean that Sykes's or Dr Hume-Griffith's accounts are a mere and impersonal display of facts; on the contrary these two authors-travellers manage to convey their personality and present features, such as Sykes's evident passion for exploration, which affirm their individuality in their travel memoirs. However, these personal elements are substantially crushed by a large amount of matter-of-fact observations, and there are not the frequent subjective speculations about travel and feelings which characterize the three women travellers, particularly Bell and Sackville-West.

Moreover, critics highlight that, besides the gender question, subjectivity and refinement became increasingly significant features in travelogues throughout the nineteenth century, so that late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century travelogues present a more subjective and sophisticated approach than the previous ones, which were more concerned with providing new information about foreign countries in a period when there was still much to discover. The five travelogues I have examined seem to confirm this trend of increasing subjectivity with the exception of Sykes's travel book, which is still imbued with facts like early nineteenth-century travel books. However, what these five travel books mainly demonstrate is that the travelogue is an extremely hybrid literary genre which hardly fits into fixed rules. This is proved by the heterogeneous nature which characterizes the travel books of these Persian travellers. For instance, while Bell's *Persian Pictures* consists of short personal sketches without photos or maps, Sykes's long account is chronological, meticulous

and rich in historical-cultural digressions, and is provided with the author's own photos and maps. Or again, while Mrs Hume-Griffith's *Behind the Veil* is divided into chapters each one dealing with a specific subject concerning Persia or her stay, Vita Sackville-West's *Passenger to Teheran* consists of a chronological narration of her travels divided according to the places she visited or just crossed.

In conclusion, these British travellers who visited Persia between the 1890s and the 1920s bestowed different shapes to their travel memories and looked at this foreign country from diverse perspectives, which usually derived from their background culture and inevitably conditioned their travel experience, as is evident from their travel books. Percy Sykes's and Dr Hume-Griffith's gaze is influenced by their professional involvement in Persia, while Mrs Hume-Griffith's approach is frequently conditioned by religion. Gertrude Bell and Vita Sackville-West sometimes display Oriental exoticism and clichés, but also their difficulty in grasping the whole of this different culture. However, all these travellers share a sheer fascination for Persian landscape, certainly due to its dissimilarity from the British landscape they were used to, and more or less extensively express a sincere love for this country, which, despite the difficulties they encountered, satisfied their souls.

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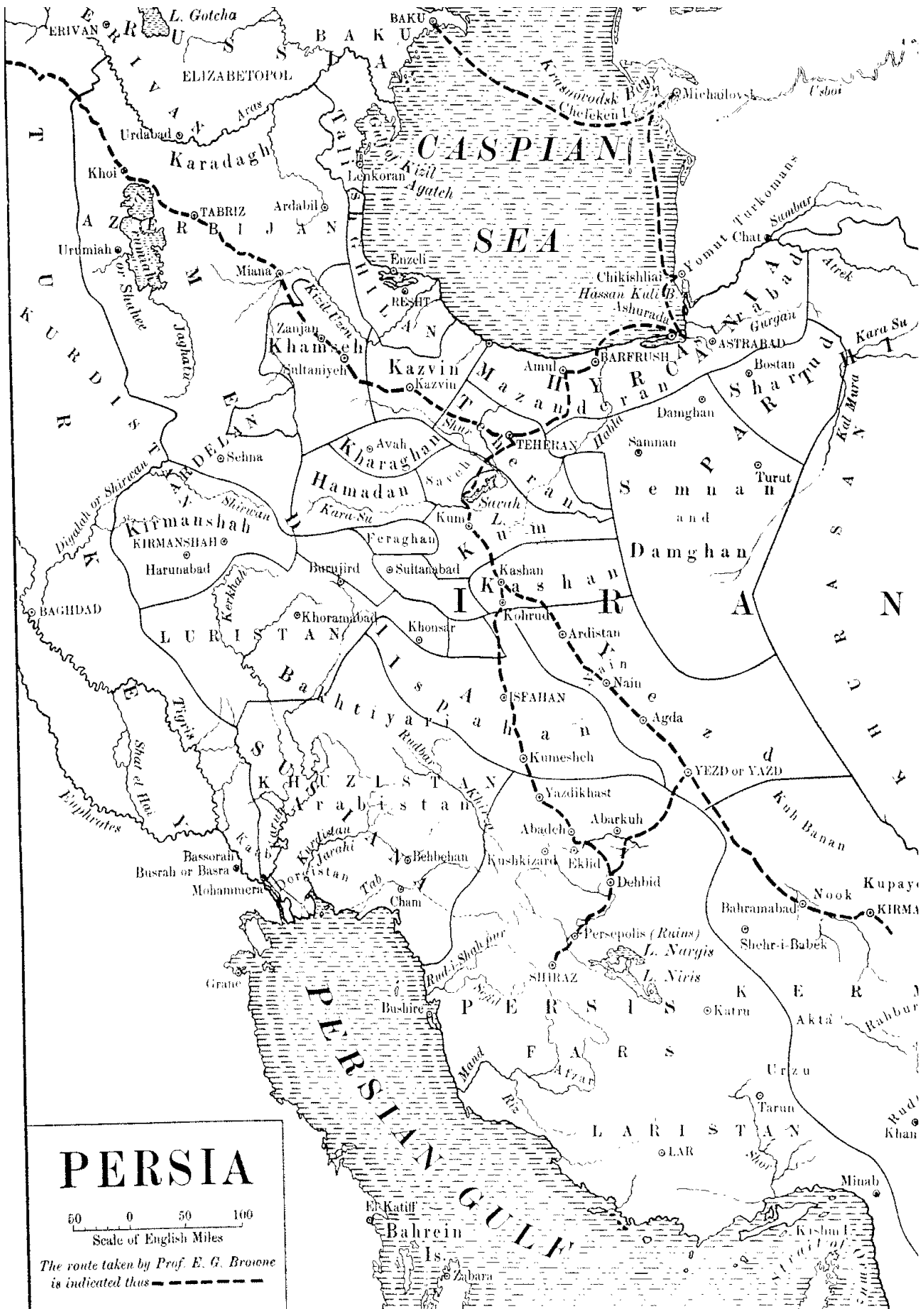
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Map 1. Persia in the 1890s (from E.G. Browne, *A Year amongst the Persians*)



Map 2. Iran today