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Introducing Mr. D'Arcy's Persians

Iranians in Jane Austen's England

In late September 1815, a ship sailed into the provincial harbor of Great Yarmouth carrying what was at the time a most unusual cargo: a party of frightened Iranian students. In the hope of furthering their studies, they were traveling to the land they called *Inglistan*, seeking in particular what they called the *'ulum-i jadid*, or “new sciences,” for which England was gaining fame. Four years earlier, two other Iranian youths had arrived with the same purpose, though in 1813 one of them had died; he was buried in St. Pancras churchyard in London. And so there remained six of them.

In December that year, there appeared a famous depiction of the country into which the young Muslims had wandered: Jane Austen's *Emma*. To this day, *Emma* defines our image of the time, an age of elegant ballrooms, exquisite manners, and crimson-jacketed captains. It was into the living version of that fictionalized world that the Iranians had sailed. Though Miss Austen would die two years after their arrival, her novels *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* did not appear till 1818, when the six Muslims were still living in London and exploring other towns like Bath. But in September 1815, it was all just beginning, and over the following months, these Muslim gentlemen would be more fully, and politely, introduced to Miss Austen's country by their aptly named chaperone, Mr. D'Arcy.

In principle, there was nothing strange about Muslims coming to study in a distant non-Islamic land: the Prophet Muhammad had famously urged all Muslims to “seek knowledge unto China”—that is, to follow learning wherever it led, even to the ends of the earth. Nonetheless, these pioneering Muslim students—*taliban* or “seekers of knowl-

edge,” as they termed themselves—marked the beginning of a new age in the old relationship between Europe and Islam. Arriving in London over a decade before the Egyptian scholar Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi led his delegation of Arab students to Paris, the six Iranians were the first group of Muslims to ever study in western Europe. At a time when the presence of Muslims in Europe is increasingly brought into question, what they learned—and the friendships they made with non-Muslims—gives us a different way of imagining the relationship between “Islam and the West.” Their human story lends an alternative etiology, a more harmonious genesis, for modern Muslim and Christian relations. For if nothing else, the following pages show that Muslims could be rationalists and progressives and Europeans religious bigots.

One of the Iranian students, Mirza Salih of Shiraz, wrote in his native Persian a diary that describes their student years in England. Never translated, at a distance of two centuries, the diary allows us to follow the fortunes of the shivering youths who arrived on the coast of East Anglia that early autumn evening in 1815. Recounting their escapades in detail, the diary tells of adventures that involved industrialists, freemasons, professors, political radicals, missionaries, and more than a few of Miss Austen’s wise and beguiling women. In his *Culture and Imperialism*, the celebrated critic Edward Said tried to deconstruct Jane Austen’s novels to detect in them a hidden imperial underworld, to as it were find slaves in the cellars of Mansfield Park. Mirza Salih’s diary is the key to the cellar door, leading us from the novel’s dark allusions to foreigners into the bright sunlight of the larger, international world that encompassed Austen’s little England. For his diary metaphorically opens the cellar door onto the immigrant corridors above to show how a group of Muslim migrants found their way into the fashionable soirées of London and Bath. Since Mirza Salih had a sense for pathos and drama, his diary entries carry the wit and charm of their era. Together with a cache of the students’ letters stored for two hundred years in the files of the Foreign Office, these sundry forgotten jottings drill a spyhole through the centuries into the neglected Muslim wing of Mansfield Park.

Hoping to learn English to access the knowledge held in what he called “the *madrasas* of Oxford,” Mirza Salih was a man with a mission. And it was a mission of the highest importance. For he and his com-

panions had been dispatched by the crown prince of Iran to acquire the latest scientific learning with which to protect Iran from the Russian Empire that just two years earlier had seized Iran's northwestern provinces. The son of a court official, Mirza Salih had no illusions as to the importance of his mission. Faced with a seemingly unstoppable Russia that had already defeated the far stronger Ottoman Empire, Iran lacked not only the technology to defend itself but also the diplomatic ties and knowledge of European ways to negotiate with or even understand its hostile neighbors. Fearful of Russian expansion into Asia, and suspicious of the ambitions of Napoleon, in around 1810 Britain had offered assistance to Iran, sending a handful of officers to train its military, some of whom served alongside Iranian soldiers in the latter stages of the ill-fated war against Russia from 1804–13. It sounds a familiar story, except that by a peculiar coincidence of history and fiction among the officers was a man who seemed to have stepped from the pages of *Pride and Prejudice*: a real-life Mr. D'Arcy (if not Jane Austen's Darcy). This was Captain Joseph D'Arcy (1780–1848) of the Royal Artillery, the man who in 1815 stepped ashore with the students in Great Yarmouth to introduce them to the society from which Miss Austen was then spinning her novels. For when Mr. D'Arcy completed his tour of duty training soldiers in the mountainous northwest of Iran and was about to leave for his long journey home, he had been collared by the crown prince 'Abbas Mirza. Persuaded against his instincts, he finally agreed to escort to England the group of would-be students. As Mr. D'Arcy delicately phrased the matter at the time, writing to the Foreign Office in London from the crown prince's court at Tabriz, "His Royal Highness has required me to take charge of five individuals of his nation for the purpose of procuring them such an education in England as may make them of service to his government hereafter."

That faded letter from a mountainous city in northwestern Iran marked the students' entry into English history. In it, Mr. D'Arcy recorded their names and intended subjects of study: Mirza Riza, who sought "a knowledge of artillery"; Mirza Ja'far, "a young man, to learn chemistry"; Muhammad 'Ali, "a smith, to learn to make locks"; Mirza Ja'far Husayni, "to learn engineering"; and Mirza Salih (or Mirza Solley, as D'Arcy transcribed his name), "to acquire knowledge of the English language to become translator to the Persian government."

Reaching England's damp and pleasant land in the early autumn of 1815 after more than four months of travel, Mirza Muhammad Salih ibn Hajji Baqir Khan *marhum* Shirazi ("Mirza Muhammad Salih son of Hajji Baqir Khan, *deceased*, of Shiraz") surely wobbled and stared around him. He was no refugee stowaway, but owing his passage to the polite inability of an English officer to refuse a princely request, he was not an entirely welcome guest either. It was not the first time this had happened: in 1811, the British ambassador to Iran Sir Harford Jones had been similarly persuaded to bring two young Iranians home with him. The costs had proved considerable. Although one of them, Muhammad Kazim, died in London in 1813, the medical education being given to the survivor, Hajji Baba Afshar, was becoming expensive. Mr. D'Arcy was fretting from the moment they reached dry land at Great Yarmouth. Still, both he and the young Muslims were gentlemen—he a military officer; they court officials, or *mirzas*. And their master in Iran was none other than the crown prince 'Abbas Mirza, whose name was already known to readers of *The Times* in London. Perhaps that would help Mr. D'Arcy pass them on to more willing or wealthy patrons. Then as now, class was an international currency, and fully aware of its value, neither Mr. D'Arcy nor the *mirzas* wished to debase it. But then as now too, a good education was expensive, and it was already clear to Mr. D'Arcy that his role as chaperone could easily turn financially ruinous. Foreign "infidels" in what was still very much a Christian land, for their part the Muslim strangers were all too aware that they would need more than a little help from their friends. And as yet, their only English friend was the sulky and reluctant Mr. D'Arcy.

The year 1815 was remarkably early for Middle Eastern Muslims to come to study in Europe. Even progressive Egypt, which for centuries had kept much closer trading ties with Italy and other regions of Europe, did not send its first small party of students to London until 1818, with a larger group reaching Paris in 1826. Dispatched to Paris as a group of more than forty young men, the Egyptian student mission was better organized than its Iranian predecessor and even counted among its number a remarkably open-minded *imam* as chaperone. Arranged on a princely spur of the moment, the Iranian venture was an altogether more ad hoc affair in which its English overseer regretted

his involvement from the start. And since Mr. D’Arcy’s disinterest had already become apparent on the long journey to England via Russia, the young Iranians may have already suspected that, even though they had reached dry land, rougher seas lay ahead.

Fortunately, 1815 was also, as these things go, a good time to be a “Persian” in England. In 1809, the arrival of a handsome ambassador from Iran had captured the imagination of Regency gentlemen and the affection of their wives. Then, in 1813, Lord Byron had published his *Oriental Tales* to unrivaled popular acclaim. On the ambassador’s departure, one debutante had taken to carrying a miniature of his portrait, his bushy black beard and flashing eyes the epitome of Byron’s oriental heroes. Here, before the British Empire reduced the Muslim kingdoms of Asia to ridicule and rubble, was an enthusiastic orientalism that the students might turn to their own devices. Among persons both of learning and of fashion, it was a period of mutual attraction as Englishmen looked to Iranians with as much interest as Iranians looked back at them. Briefly united in the global front against Napoleon and (during the Anglo-Russian War of 1807–12) the czar, England and Iran were allies not enemies. But if the interest was mutual, its motivation was different, as each side had its own ideas of what should constitute the modern world. What the students came looking for and what they found were often quite different. For England was not only the land of science and reason that the Iranians hoped to find, a secularized and idealized England that more narcissistic historians like to celebrate today. It was also a deeply religious land, a country of committed Christians divided between their antagonistic visions of a zealous or a tolerant faith. Stumbling ashore and finding their land legs, the young Muslims were walking into an England in the midst of an evangelical upsurge that the moderate vicar’s daughter Jane Austen chose to carefully downplay in her novels.

The Muslim Modernity of ‘Abbas Mirza

To understand what drove the students towards their English *Wanderjahren*, we need to turn first to the prehistory of their journey in the new diplomatic ties between Britain and Iran that were established a

decade or so earlier. For they would never have departed Tabriz were it not for the spate of diplomatic missions sent to Iran in the early 1800s on behalf of the government of Great Britain and the governors of the East India Company. The presence in Iran of their hapless cicerone, Mr. D'Arcy, was itself the result of these new political ties. For after the embassy of Sir Gore Ouseley in 1811–12, the young Captain D'Arcy was left in Tabriz to instruct the Iranian army in the newest techniques of war, a tutelage that also strengthened British interests by checking Russia's march through the Caucasus. The window of educational opportunity that these diplomatic ties opened for the court of the crown prince 'Abbas Mirza did not remain open for long. As the Napoleonic Wars ended at Waterloo in the months before the students left home, and as Britain's relations with Russia entered a different phase, Britain's diplomatic and military presence in Iran was scaled down. By the time ties with Iran reexpanded in the second half of the century, Britain's imperial ambitions began to acquire for her a distrust among some Iranians that has continued to the present day. But in 1815 at least, Britain and Iran were allies.

All in their early twenties, the students who arrived with Mr. D'Arcy were neither naïve nor blind to the rising power of the *Inglis*. Positioned as their homeland was between an expanding Russian Empire to the north and the insatiable growth of the British East India Company to the east, the students were certainly aware of the threat posed by Europeans. After all, it was concerns about Russian expansion that encouraged Iran's Qajar dynasts to forge the diplomatic relations with Britain that enabled the students to come to London. But when the students set off from Tabriz in the honeymoon glow of the Anglo-Iranian Treaty of 1812, England and Iran were partners. Enjoying all the enthusiasm of a newfound friendship, in the diplomatic exchanges between the Iranian ruler Fath 'Ali Shah and King George III the sovereigns addressed one another in the language of "friendship," or *dusti* in the Persian versions of the treaty. A product of its genteel and mannered age, it was a relationship between friendly sovereigns that was captured in a dazzling diplomatic gift that Fath 'Ali Shah sent to King George: a two-sided portrait with a painting of the shah's face on the one side and a mirror on the other. When George III looked into the mirror side, like lovers in Persian tradition, he saw his own image and

the facing image of his Iranian friend join together in the reflection. So when mad King George gazed into the looking glass, even in his saner moments he saw Fath 'Ali Shah peeping back at him over his shoulder. Though the two kings never met, they were joined through a craftsman's conceit.

In such charming ways, from 1797 to 1834 the long reign of Fath 'Ali Shah saw Iran greatly expand its contacts with Europe. It was not the shah himself who was the main agitator for modernization, but one of his sons, the aforementioned 'Abbas Mirza (1789–1833). It was he who would dispatch the two parties of students to London, the first with two students (one of whom died) in 1811 and the second with five students in 1815. As the sincerest reformer of the Qajar dynasty, 'Abbas Mirza saw himself standing at the dawn of a new age, an *'asr-i jadid*, that he sought to usher into Iran by accessing the knowledge that was driving England through its industrial revolution. He named his program of modernization the “new order,” or *nizam-i jadid*, a term he borrowed from the neighboring Ottoman Empire, whose borders on the Mediterranean had already made them aware of the scale of change in Europe. As the second son of Fath 'Ali Shah, 'Abbas Mirza had been given the governorship of the western Iranian province of Azerbaijan at the tender age of ten, an appointment that placed him on the front line of Russian expansion. From the city of Tabriz on the edge of the Russian Empire, 'Abbas Mirza was gradually exposed to European ideas and innovations, far more than other members of his dynasty in Tehran and elsewhere in the remote interior. Facing an aggressive and expansive Russia, it was, then, for practical reasons that 'Abbas Mirza learned the importance of the “new sciences” if Iran was to maintain her territorial integrity.

Yet the prince was also a man of culture, who had been given a traditional princely education in the *adab al-muluk*, the Persian arts of kingship, an education that he complemented in his later youth by reading about the history of Europe. As a child he had been taught the heroic histories of the ancient rulers of Iran who were commemorated in Firdawsi's medieval epic *Shahnama*, and he retained an affection for Firdawsi above all poets as an adult. But despite his treaties with the British, the real hero of the adult 'Abbas Mirza was Napoleon Bonaparte, whom he admired for his great modernizing reforms. When

the German diplomat Moritz von Kotzebue traveled to Tabriz as part of the Russian embassy of 1817, he recorded how on entering 'Abbas Mirza's residence he was "surprised to see in two niches, in the upper part of the room, a portrait of the [Russian] Emperor Alexander, and one of Bonaparte, the last of which was a striking likeness." Like his French hero, 'Abbas Mirza instituted a whole range of reforms, with Iran's first military academy, a new school system and a series of administrative reforms. It was in this connection that Mr. D'Arcy had arrived in Tabriz in a party of two royal artillery officers, two noncommissioned officers, and ten privates that was seconded to the embassy of the students' future friend, Sir Gore Ouseley. After the latter's departure in 1814, Mr. D'Arcy stayed on to help 'Abbas Mirza reorganize his army. Then, as we have seen, a year later on the eve of his departure from Tabriz, Mr. D'Arcy was persuaded to take home with him five young men to study in England.

From 'Abbas Mirza's interactions with the ambassadorial and military parties, he recognized the benefits his country could gain from learning from the English. An article in *The Times* of London praised "his intercourse with learned Europeans; his speaking the English and French languages very fluently." An obituary later written by the diplomatist Henry Willock, who knew him personally, described 'Abbas Mirza as "a prince who laboured to introduce such improvements in his country as might enable the people to emulate, in military prowess and in literary attainments, the present generation in Europe, and who studied, for the advancement of this object, to communicate to them the active habits and superior intelligence of those Europeans who visited the Persian court." There is certainly a tone of condescension in these lines; perhaps Mr. Willock was thinking of himself when he wrote of Europeans of "superior intelligence" at 'Abbas Mirza's court. But his basic observation still stands: 'Abbas Mirza led a pioneering attempt to transfer the scientific "new learning" to Iran.

The Alluring Ambassador

Intrepid as the students sent by 'Abbas Mirza were, they were not the first Iranians to find their way into Jane Austen's England. In 1809, the

first Iranian ambassador in two centuries made his entry into London. His name was Abu'l-Hasan Khan. Sent to cement the new political ties between England and Iran as allies against Napoleon, by blazing a trail through London high society Abu'l-Hasan also prepared the way for the students who followed him six years later. The scion of a family with close connections to the shah's court, Abu'l-Hasan knew enough of high politics to have survived exile in India and to have returned in triumph to Tehran after a change of rulers. Worldly and assured, Abu'l-Hasan could hold his own with poets, politicians, or princes. The success of his mission is almost taken for granted in his own Persian diary, which does for the early Regency period what the travel letters of the no less worldly German prince Hermann von Pückler-Muskau does for its tail end. Through the diary, we are able to see a side of the Regency that is usually obscured from view, a picture of gentleman scholars and old East India men keen to share their enthusiasms for Persian paintings and the poetry of Hafiz. Emily, the precocious daughter of the co-director of the East India Company, Sir Thomas Metcalfe, even took to reciting lyrical Persian *ghazals* to Abu'l-Hasan. On other occasions, the ambassador was hosted at dinner parties serving great *pilaws* of rice cooked in the Persian style (possibly with the help of Indian servants) and taken to inspect the libraries of orientalists with collections of Persian texts. One such library was that of the erstwhile ambassador to Iran, Sir Gore Ouseley, which led Abu'l-Hasan to comment in detail on its manuscripts, all written by well-known calligraphers.

Just as during the British Embassy of 1810–12 Sir Gore's secretary William Price took an interest in the work of Iranian artists (he visited the studio of the noted painter Aqa 'Ali Naqash, whose "figures, though having Persian stiffness about them, were very nicely made out and finely coloured"), so did Abu'l-Hasan inspect the works of English painters. He even posed for several portraits, including two by the society portraitist Sir William Beechey (1753–1839). As well as recording his impressions of such experiences in his diary, he took notes on a vast miscellany of English customs and statistics, from the number of prostitutes on London's streets to the most popular stars at Covent Garden's theaters, such as the clown Joseph Grimaldi and the tenor Diomiro Tramezzani. For their part, the English were no less fasci-

nated with Abu'l-Hasan. His daily rounds were regularly reported in newspaper gossip pages as London's great and good vied for the honor of hosting him for dinner or for what he considered the peculiar custom of the breakfast party. As anyone who has sat through long formal dinners making small-talk in a foreign language amid an unfamiliar culture will know, such occasions could be trying for Abu'l-Hasan, who never managed to learn English fluently. But with a diplomatic license that one suspects suited his personal inclinations just fine, the Muslim chose to quaff wine and brandy at dinner like the English rather than appear standoffish. His sociability impressed almost everyone who met him. Still, when an English custom struck him as too much, he was not averse to speaking his mind: he once refused to eat the expensive asparagus that one hostess served him on the grounds that in Iran, no one would eat grasses that grew wild on the plains no matter how much they cost! His private comments to Sir Gore Ouseley on the wonders he witnessed in England were no less to the point. He informed his fellow diplomatist that he had seen "hundred-year-old men trying to seduce young girls and hundred-year-old ladies flirting with young men at parties so crowded that you cannot move and so hot that you could fry a chicken!" His candor offers a refreshing contrast with the mannered conversations of Jane Austen's heroes.

Abu'l-Hasan was only slightly less candid when asked to write an account of his impressions of the English for the *Morning Post*. Arguing that since to describe only his favorable impressions of England would seem like flattery, he explained that he had better write something of the bad as well. Once again, for him the bad was the interminable parties that were the highlight of the London calendar: "I not like such crowd in evening party every night—In cold weather not very good—now, hot weather, much too bad. I very much astonish, every day now much hot than before, evening parties much crowd than before.—Pretty beautiful ladies come sweat that not very good, and spoil my happiness. I think old ladies after eighty-five years not come to evening party that much better." Though some scholars suspect the letter was the forgery of a contemporary prankster, its words have an air of truth and certainly echo some of the sentiments of his Persian diary.



Fig. 1. The Alluring Ambassador: *Portrait of Abu'l-Hasan* by Sir William Beechey, 1809–10, oil on canvas. Source: © Compton Verney.

With the indiosyncratic command of idiom shown in the newspaper letter, that the handsome Abu'l-Hasan captured the imagination of Regency London is scarcely surprising. While some, such as the young Emily Metcalfe and Sir Gore Ouseley, reciprocated his efforts by speaking to him in Persian, others attempted a halfway house of speaking English “in a Persian style.” Helping to promote this short-lived fashion was one of the more unusual language books of the age, *Persian Recreations, or Oriental Stories, with Notes to which is prefixed some*

Account of the Two Ambassadors from Iran to James the First and George the Third, written by the pseudonymous Philoxenus Secundus, the “Second Lover of Strangers.” Comparing the cultivation of Iranians to that of “the French in the days of Gallic civilization,” Philoxenus offered Londoners an illustrative selection of the “wit and pleasantry” that comprised the Persian art of conversation. These were the *latifa* (“a joke”), the *nikila* (“a good thing, or *bon mot*”), the *pand* (“an admonition”), the *nuqta* (“a quaint conceit, or nice distinction”), and the *vaqi‘a* (“an extraordinary event”). Samples of these gambits were given in English in the main body of the book, before which Philoxenus prefixed a set of what were clearly firsthand observations of Abu’l-Hasan that fill out the necessarily one-sided picture of his Persian diary. Abu’l-Hasan, wrote Philoxenus, “was a fine handsome dark man, and, whether on foot or on horseback, appeared to great advantage. He rode well, walked fast, and talked loud, and incessantly.” Little surprise then that this cultivated Persian gallant (as Philoxenus pictured him) left an impression on London’s novel-reading gentlewomen. This was so much so, Philoxenus added, that the ambassador “was sometimes too much annoyed by the insatiate admiration, fixed stare, and intense regard of the British ladies, who looked with their hearts in their eyes.” In parody of lines from Virgil, the fake Roman Philoxenus added the following epithet in Latin:

Nequeunt expleri corda tuendo
Nigrantes oculos, vultum, corvinaque menta.

None could sate their hearts gazing on those dark eyes,
That face, and crow-black beard.

The original lines that Philoxenus was parodying came from Virgil’s *Aeneid* and read:

Nequeunt expleri corda tuendo
Terribilis oculos, vultum villosaque saetis
Pectora semiferi atque exstinctos faucibus ignis

None could sate their hearts, gazing on those terrible eyes,
On the visage of the brutish monster, on his shaggy bristled breast,
And the flames quenched in his throat.

The original passage dealt with Cacus, a monster that feasted on human flesh and had just been killed by Hercules, so the comparison with the ambassador was hardly flattering. Still, Abu'l-Hasan seems not to have been averse to encouraging the infatuations of Englishwomen and could, as Philoxenus knowingly put it, be “gallant.”

Although the identity of Philoxenus, the writer behind these anecdotes, is uncertain, he has been identified as the orientalist and antiquarian, Stephen Weston (1747–1830). An underemployed but gifted clergyman of independent means, Weston published several pioneering works on Arabic literature while helping in his extensive spare time in the deciphering of the Rosetta Stone. Whatever the truth of Philoxenus's identity, the fascination with the Iranian ambassador that he documented promised well for the Iranian students who reached London five years later. For after the enchanting ambassador departed in 1810, there was the chance that Mirza Salih and his well-bred companions might serve as his substitutes at the dinner tables of the great and good. Yet it would be far from an easy role for the students to play. For unlike Abu'l-Hasan, they had neither a diplomat's purse nor credentials to ease their way.

Mutual Learning

Fortunately, the diplomatic exchanges that brought Abu'l-Hasan to London also provided an opportunity for the student diarist Mirza Salih to get to know the British before he and his companions left home. The earliest of the envoys sent to Iran on behalf of the Crown and the East India Company reached Tehran in 1799, though the first formal ambassador, Sir Harford Jones, was not to arrive till 1808. It was in response to Sir Harford's mission that Abu'l Hasan was dispatched to England and this led in turn to the embassy of Sir Gore Ouseley, who accompanied Abu'l-Hasan on his journey back to Iran, where they arrived together in 1811. It was through the army officers attached to these embassies that Mirza Salih had his first exposure to Europeans. For in 1810, he served as secretary to Henry Lindsay-Bethune (1787–1851), an infantry officer from the Madras Horse Artillery seconded, like Mr. D'Arcy, to the crown prince 'Abbas Mirza's army. Since

Lieutenant Lindsay-Bethune was “a giant standing six feet eight inches,” his Iranian comrades jokingly compared him to their epic warrior hero, Rustam. He must have made a striking first impression on Mirza Salih, who perhaps wondered if the *Inglis* were all a race of giants. He would soon learn better. For a short while later, during the embassy of Sir Gore Ouseley from 1811 to 1812, Mirza Salih made the acquaintance of Sir Gore's elder brother, Sir William. A keen learner of Persian, Sir William Ouseley had persuaded Sir Gore to employ him as a secretary so he could travel for the first time to an Iran that was still largely *terra incognita* to Europeans. Looking back a decade later, Sir Gore's assistant secretary, William Price, described the circumstances in which Mirza Salih joined the embassy:

The gentlemen and servants of the Embassy encamped in the plain, near the Palace Gardens [of Shiraz], and remained there till the 10th of July. While we were at Shiraz, I became acquainted with Mirza Saulih, well known for his literary acquirements: he entered our train and remained with the Embassy a considerable time, during which, I prevailed upon him to compose a set of dialogues in his native tongue, the pure dialect of Shiraz.

Less a prelude to his journey to England, Mirza Salih's tour through Iran with the Ouseleys was more of a trial run, exposing him to these worldly and Persian-speaking *Inglis*, showing him how and what to learn from them, and teaching him how to enter the pedagogical bargain of instructing them in return. Over and again, this pattern of mutuality, born of interest and sympathy for each other's culture, would recur after Mirza Salih reached England and define what was best about his time there.

We know more of the early links that Mirza Salih forged with the Ouseley circle during those months in Iran back in 1812 through the collection of Persian manuscripts that Sir William later donated to Oxford's Bodleian Library. For within the Ouseley Collection lies the original manuscript of the set of Persian “dialogues” that Mirza Salih composed for the two secretarial Williams, Price and Ouseley. Titled *Su'al u Javab*, “Questions and Answers,” the dialogues were sample conversations with the people whom a traveler might meet in Iran,

from servants and merchants to gardeners and scribes. Written in a large, scrawling hand on what was clearly the blue English notepaper that one of the two Williams had carried from England, this early example of a “teach yourself” language guide was signed with the name “Mirza Muhammad Salih, the son of Hajji Baqir Khan, of Shiraz,” the Islamic date of 8 Jumada al-Awwal 1227 (corresponding to May 20, 1812) and a dedication to Sir William Ouseley, the latter’s name also written in Arabic script.

Bound together in the same volume in the Bodleian Library is another manuscript that Mirza Salih wrote for Sir William, perhaps at the latter’s request. Forty folios long, the manuscript contains a description of the villages and towns through which the Ouseley embassy traveled on its journey from Isfahan to Tehran. On the front page of the manuscript, Sir William later wrote out a descriptive title in English: “The Journal of Mirzā Mohammed Sāleh of Shirāz, who accompanied the English embassy under Sir Gore Ouseley from Isfahān to Teherān, describing the different towns and stages on that journey. Q. 78 pp., in his own handwriting, and probably unique.” Unlike the later diary of Mirza Salih’s student years in London, the Bodleian manuscript is an impersonal text, its dry descriptions of the countryside, buildings, and markets along the route making it more a work of geography than a true journal. Since it ends with another dedication to Sir William and a date of three days later than the language guide, together with its contents this suggests that Mirza Salih traveled with the embassy as one of its Iranian assistants, perhaps working as a local secretary in the same way that he already had for the giant Lieutenant Lindsay-Bethune. That he did not hold any important office we can surmise from the absence of any mention of him in the unpublished diary that Sir Gore wrote along the way (though he did note the presence of nine unnamed “Persian servants”). Nor was Mirza Salih mentioned in the surviving accounts of the embassy written by its two official secretaries, Sir William Ouseley and William Price, though as we have seen, the latter did mention him when he came to publish Mirza Salih’s language book a decade later. In any case, Mirza Salih was certainly not the embassy’s official guide, or *mihmandar*, whose name was Muhammad Zaki Khan. Aged around twenty as he was at the time,

it is probably safe to conclude that Mirza Salih was one of the local secretarial staff employed to smooth interactions between the British mission and the governors through whose territories they passed.

What is important about the two manuscripts Mirza Salih wrote during the Ouseley embassy, though, is that they show him becoming acquainted with the Ouseley brothers almost three years before the students reached the shores of England. For in the youthful manuscripts that Mirza Salih wrote in the roadside camps of central Iran, he had already grasped something about mutuality of interests, of learning from Britons who were likewise learning from him, that would prove useful later. Friendship, tolerance, understanding: these are mutual values built on sympathy, travel, and learning. Already nurtured on that journey through Iran in 1812, this two-sided process was to characterize the students' subsequent years in England where they and their hosts learned the merits of shared understanding.

As Mirza Salih's journey to England grew out of Sir William Ouseley's Iranian travels beforehand, the pattern of learning, and travel as part of it, was intertwined and mutual. Like Mirza Salih and his companions, who would later carry back knowledge of England to Iran, the Ouseley brothers were cultural middlemen, founder members of the Royal Asiatic Society and Britain's greatest early promoters of Persian studies. In an age that has been called "the Second Great Age of Discovery," these journeys were formative for both parties, firsthand experiences of distant and little-known cultures. In the books they later wrote about each other's countries, both Sir William and Mirza Salih were what we would today call ethnographers. Describers of the ways of strangers, explainers of foreign peoples they had come to understand and admire, they were bridge-builders between societies that often saw themselves as adverse and inimical. Yet however unfamiliar, as Mirza Salih and Sir William recognized, their worlds were interpenetrable and intelligible; because, of course, they were not two worlds but one. It was, moreover, a world that they bound together through learning, and in time, through friendship. For as we will see in later chapters, Mirza Salih would use the diary he later wrote in England to create an ethnography of amity.

All this suggests that we should not to confine the students' relationship with their English hosts within the conceptual bonds of colo-



Fig. 2. A Lost Window on the Regency: The Manuscript of Mirza Salih's Diary. Source: © The British Library Board. Add.24034 f255.

nialism. When they reached London in 1815, Britain's power in Asia was still only nascent and Victoria, the future "Empress of India," was not even born till the year of their departure. If much of the wealth behind the gilded world of Jane Austen's novels was indeed built on the sweat of Caribbean slaves, it is no less true that the East India Company had far from finished building its Asian empire. Much of India still remained to be conquered, while the Company's expansion into Southeast Asia was still over the horizon, with Singapore and Malacca not acquired till 1819 and 1824 and Burma not defeated till 1826 and 1853 (itself a task in which Jane Austen's brother, Charles, played a leading if fatal role). In Africa, British rule was just beginning in 1815 with a small settlement at the Cape of Good Hope allowed by the Congress of Vienna only that year. As for expansion into the Mid-

dle East, it was Russia and France that had by this time battled the still-mighty Ottoman Empire, and it would not be till the 1830s that the first European colony in the Arab world was initiated with the French conquest of Algeria. To point this out is not to pretend that colonialism did not happen; it is merely to point out that by 1815 much of it had not happened yet. Thus it was that when the Muslim students landed in Great Yarmouth, they entered a land they saw as an ally against their old enemy, Russia. If many future Iranians would come to see a hidden English hand behind every blow to their nation, then the students had not yet learned this reflex. England was a friendly but still unknown entity; like other Muslims, the students did not yet know what to make of the English; nor did they know how to relate their ideas to their own, which to accept and which, if any, to reject. Through their learning and affections, when they landed in Great Yarmouth Mirza Salih and his companions were set to become Muslim cosmopolitans, eastern counterparts to the Hafiz-quoting Ouseley brothers who were already Mirza Salih's friends. Through mutual interest that fostered mutual respect, both parties learned to trust one another. And this will only become clear by telling a story not of "civilizations" and "cultures" in the abstract, but of individual people in all their complex humanity.

Great Stakes, Small Steps

It is hard to overestimate the mutual novelty of England and Iran to one another in the early 1800s, a time when both countries relied on the patchy, dated, and indirect knowledge passed down from a brief but intense exchange of ambassadors and traders in Shakespeare's time. It is true that by the early 1800s, the East India Company was employing local agents in the Iranian port of Bushire and inland cities such as Shiraz, but they were usually Indians or Armenians and the messages they sent by mule and ship had to be interpreted in distant London or Calcutta through a fog of misunderstanding. It was not until the year of the students' arrival in London that the East India Company's former emissary to Tehran, Sir John Malcolm, published his pioneering *History of Persia* (the students were already on their way home by the time Sir William Ouseley and William Price pub-

lished their accounts of Iran). Against this background, travel diaries served as a crucial medium of knowledge for both sides. The travelogue was not yet the armchair traveler's celebration of the picturesque. It was a serious, multipurpose genre for collating information on transport, languages, commodities, institutions, customs, and of course culture. Using the same methods of learning, Mirza Salih and the two Williams, Price and Ouseley, traveled, observed, and wrote about what were to their readers back home scarcely known regions still wrapped in legend. For most people in England, Iran was still Shakespeare's mysterious "land of the Sophy," while for Iranians England was vaguely recalled as the land of Shah 'Abbas's exotic servant, the Elizabethan freelance Sir Robert Shirley. For both the English and the Iranians, travel was the primary means of learning about a wider world that, even as late as 1800, was still unfamiliar in detail.

The traffic in knowledge was two-way. The same period that witnessed the explosion of the English travelogue in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw Iranian (and Indian) Muslims write accounts of their own experiences in distant *Firangistan* or Europe. Mirza Salih would draw on this genre of the Persian *safarnama* or "travelogue" in the writing of his diary which he had begun as soon as he left Iran with his compatriots and Mr. D'Arcy, recording in detail their passage through Russia and thence towards England. Though it would not be published till the 1960s, he wrote it with the intention that on his return home manuscript copies would be made for his royal master and his peers in Tabriz. It was, then, a part-public, part-private text, both diary and travelogue.

If student diaries are not often seen as the transformative stuff of history, then they should be. For over the course of more than a century and a half, the transfers of knowledge made by Mirza Salih and his companions would utterly transform Iran. When they set off from Tabriz, their homeland possessed almost nothing of the technology that was busily transforming Jane Austen's country estate England into the land of dark satanic mills bemoaned by William Blake. In 1815, Iran did not have a single printing press or newspaper; it had little scientific equipment beyond antiquated astrolabes; its doctors knew nothing of the changing methods of medicine or the geological, chemical, and other applied sciences that were driving England's industrial

revolution. Yet through its contacts with Britain and Russia, the court of 'Abbas Mirza in Tabriz was aware that Europeans had come to possess powerful new forms of knowledge, the *'ulum-i jadid*, or new sciences, that were transforming Europe's place in the world. As the sons of court bureaucrats, the six students sent to England already recognized the value of these new sciences and hoped to spend enough time in London to master their various components. Their mission was no exercise in education as self-promotion. As their princely patron admonished them, their responsibility was to Iran as a whole, whose destiny they held in their skilled hands and sharp minds.

What they and other Muslim students sent to Europe after they achieved would transform their homelands into recognizably modern nations, albeit never into economic powerhouses. There are complex reasons for this, but one of them is the uneven flow of knowledge caused by barriers to education both around and inside Muslim nations. It is here that the students' story helps us grasp the human complications behind such abstract ideas as "divergence," "development" and "progress." For what Mirza Salih's diary recounts is less a tale of unmitigated success than a parable of the false starts and repeated efforts required to even access let alone acquire an education two hundred years ago when Europe began its "great divergence" from the Middle East and Asia at large. The saga of Mirza Salih and his companions is one of the struggles of foreign Muslims to break into the social circles of English learning, before even attempting which they first had to master the unknown language of the *Inglis*. The challenges ahead as they walked down the gangplank at Great Yarmouth were manifold. Faced with the great stakes of the future of their homeland, they took their first small steps onto English soil.

Now we must pursue them. If what follows is a tour of Jane Austen's world led by six meandering Muslims, then it has the virtue of revealing an alternative history of England, a history in which Muslims were present at the birth of modern Europe. What is more, it is an amicable tale, a story of xenophilia. For theirs was a journey through knowledge and faith unto friendship. Let us join them at the start of their adventures.

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