

SW. PERSIA

A Political Officer's Diary

1907-1914

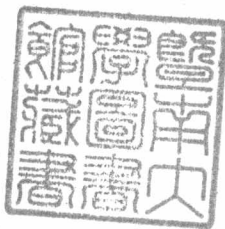
BY

SIR ARNOLD WILSON

K.C.I.E., C.S.I., C.M.G., D.S.O., M.P.

'So teach us to number our days:
that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom'

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TO
HUGH WILSON

MY SON! from my example learn the War
In Camps to suffer and in Fields to dare,
No happier chance than mine attend thy care.

* * *

Then, when thy ripper years shall send thee forth
To toils of war, be mindful of my worth
Assert thy birthright, and in Arms be known.

* * *

Thy Mother's offspring and thy Father's Son.

VIRGIL, *Aeneid* VII. 435-40.
DRYDEN *Trans.*

INTRODUCTION

I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?
Ecclesiastes iii. 22.

THIS autobiographical fragment relates to the years 1907-14 inclusive which I spent in SW. Persia, save for two short spells of leave at home and a few months with my Regiment in India. It was the centre span of a period of great diplomatic activity which reached a peak, first with the signature of the Anglo-French Agreements of 1904, again with the conclusion of the Anglo-Russian Convention in 1907, and finally in 1914 with the outbreak of war. I was a Lieutenant and not quite 23 when I first went to Persia: I entered the war as a Captain just over 30. From the time I went to Sandhurst in my 18th year, and until I married, I wrote almost daily a page or two of foolscap to my parents recording events as they occurred and the impression they left upon me, interspersed with many comments and occasional reflections upon current political issues at home and abroad, a few of which I reproduce here, as representative alike of the writer and of his times.

I also kept a diary, the greater part of which was from the outset 'official' in the sense that the greater part of it was sent every week to my superiors at Bushire and transmitted by them to the Foreign Department of the Government of India, where it was printed as part of their 'Proceedings'. I made it a rule to retain no copies of official documents which, once submitted, became the property of the Government under which I served, but, from my original diaries and from my letters home, which my mother was at pains (unknown to me) to preserve, I have been able to reconstitute a record of my doings and

thoughts, about one-sixth of which is here reproduced in almost precisely the same unadorned form in which it was recorded, often in camp by candlelight, from day to day.¹

Here and there, for brevity's sake, I have summarized events and recorded a few contemporary comments distinguished in print by a slightly greater interval between the lines. Otherwise the book as a whole has been compiled in my spare time whilst serving as Air-Gunner officer in a squadron of Vickers-Wellington Bombers in East Anglia. I have not had ready access to my own or to public libraries and have not been able to check all dates or to verify all my quotations. If at times the narrative appears personal to the point of egotism I would remind the reader that most of it was written to my parents, whom I could not hope to see for more than a few months every five or six years, or for my own delectation and guidance, and its completion in the interval between successive North Sea Sweeps and raids over Germany, has inevitably invested it with something of the character of an *apologia pro vita sua*.

If, as I hope, it reads as an exposition of the gay text which I have placed at the head of this introduction, it is sufficient explanation that my companions for the last six months have been squadron-leaders, flying-officers, pilot-officers, sergeant-pilots, observers, wireless operators and air-gunners, flying men all, of each of whom it may be said, as a poet has said of a blackbird,

‘he sees the branch trembling
but gaily he sings
What matter to me
I have wings, I have wings!’

The voluminous notes from which this book has been compiled contain much historical and archaeological, geographical, geological, zoological, and botanical in-

¹ The letters *D* and *L* respectively followed by a date indicate an extract from my diary or from a letter to my father or mother.

INTRODUCTION

formation, for I derived from my mother and father a keen interest in almost everything I saw and heard. Meteorological, linguistic, and ethnological data, scraps of folk-lore and tales current among the people in the midst of whom I lived crowded the pages of my notebooks. Much of it was copied at second hand from good authorities: whatever was new and of value has found its way in course of time to experts who could use my contributions, like small stones in a mosaic, to fill some gap in their knowledge. The coins I collected went to the British Museum or to the Imperial Museum at Calcutta and have been catalogued; the zoological specimens are in the Bombay Natural History Museum and recorded in its Journal; the linguistic material has been enshrined in official reports; the fossils and rock specimens have been seen by good geologists. My geographical and amateur geological notes have long ago been superseded by the patient labours of two generations of geologists and surveyors, and may well be forgotten: as Confucius says somewhere, 'men use baskets to catch fish; when they have caught the fish they forget the baskets'. The railway reconnaissances to which I have devoted so much space proved valueless, for the Persian Government, scorning to adopt an economical alignment, chose to take the Khor Musa-Burujird railway up the Diz valley—a magnificent but costly triumph of engineering skill. A motor road from Bushire to Shiraz by the direct road, made by British military engineers during the years 1917–20 and since much improved, has relegated to obscurity all schemes for railway construction from the coast.

The Turco-Persian Frontier, on the other hand, remains as demarcated in 1914, save for a few minor changes since agreed upon by the limitrophe Powers; and the Anglo-Persian Oil Company at whose prenatal creation and subsequent birth I was privileged to assist and whose rapid growth to healthy maturity I was able to

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observe at close quarters, has gone from strength to strength.

Thus it is that, though I write this Preface in dark days and among men almost every one of whom has passed many times through the valley of the shadow of death I can still, like George Meredith, look to the good spirit of man with faith in it, and with some capacity to observe current phases of history at close quarters without being blinded by the unsteady light and bewildered by the thunder of the legions.

Before the Great War my generation served men who believed in the righteousness of the vocation to which they were called, and we shared their belief. They were the priests, and we the acolytes, of a cult—*pax Britannica*—for which we worked happily and, if need be, died gladly. Curzon, at his best, was our spokesman and Kipling, at his noblest, our inspiration. Many of us, more perhaps than to-day, had been brought up in a tradition in which Ruskin, Wordsworth and Cowper, Seeley and Freeman played their parts. We read the lives of John Nicholson, Lawrence, and Roberts, and the works of Sir William Hunter, whilst we toiled at our own ponderous Gazetteers like willing slaves making bricks for builders yet to come.

In the Persian Gulf we were never long unaware of the debt we owed to the British and Indian Navies and to our Merchant Marine, or to early surveyors like the almost legendary figures of Constable and Stiffe. We read our Bibles, many of us, lived full lives and loved and laughed much, but knew, as we did so, that though for us all, the wise and the foolish, the slave and the free, for empires and anarchies, there is one end, yet would our works live after us, and by their fruits we should be judged in days to come. If we have worked well and faithfully then it is well. It is God who gives and takes away kingdoms.—

Potestas dei est et tibi, Domine, misericordia.

Saint George's Day, 1940

ARNOLD WILSON

A PRINTER'S ERRORS

- p. 90. l. 7. For *non tali auxilii* read *non tali auxilio*
p. 159. l. 23. For *post facto* read *ex post facto*
p. 221. l. 14. For *dulce* read *dulci*
p. 221. l. 22. For *custodiem* read *custodiam*
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CHAPTER I

1907

Regimental Duty in India: A Journey across Persia: Return to India: To Persia on Duty

MOST Indian Army officers, and especially those serving with one of the three Sikh Pioneer Regiments, at least two of which had been in each succeeding campaign upon and beyond every frontier of India, feel drawn from time to time to travel beyond even the vast limits of the Indian Empire. My Regiment, the 32nd Sikh Pioneers, had seen service, in the thirty years before I joined it, in Bhutan and Sikkim and Tibet, in Chitral, and on the NW. Frontier of India. It was natural, therefore, that any young officer, nurtured in such surroundings, should harbour the ambition to extend his horizon. By 1906 I had acquired a good working knowledge of and had passed the Higher Standard in Hindustani, Punjabi (the regimental dialect), Pushtu, and Persian; I had read every book I could find in the station and in our well-chosen regimental library dealing with Afghanistan and Persia and began to make plans for a journey home overland with my best friend in the Regiment, Lt. A. H. P. Cruickshank. He, too, had learned some Pushtu and Persian and was ready to travel rough and lie hard, for our means were slender.

Our first idea was to start from Quetta and make for Merv and Bokhara via Meshed, and thence home across Russia. This soon proved to be beyond our means; the Intelligence Branch, moreover, told us that passports would be refused us for such a journey by the Foreign Department, which frowned upon irresponsible travellers in those regions. So we decided to go to Bandar Abbas

and thence home via Shiraz and Isfahan, Tehran, and Resht. The I.B. sent us their $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch maps of S. Persia, full of blank spaces marked 'high hills' or 'unexplored', lent us a plane table and some instruments, and told us that they would be grateful for any additions we could make; they also gave us copies of such reports as they had upon the regions we proposed to traverse.

In March 1907 we set off gaily from Ambala for Karachi where, as second-class passengers, we boarded the slow mail steamer up the Persian Gulf. The captain at once told us that the second class was full of Arab and Persian and Hindu merchants—we should not be at ease there, nor would they welcome us: he urged us to pay the difference and travel first class. 'We have always gone second class by P. & O.,' said Cruickshank. 'Surely the B.I. is as good!' 'It is just as good,' replied the captain sturdily, 'but if the P. & O. ran up the Gulf you would still find yourself out of place aft!' Finally the Karachi agent agreed to let us go first class without paying extra, where we met Mr. (later Sir Stanley) Reed who, years later, was a colleague of mine in the House of Commons. He was Editor of *The Times of India*, and his wide knowledge made an ineffaceable impression upon our plastic minds. Five days with him did more to enlighten us upon India, Persia, and Persian Gulf affairs than all the books we had read; I devoted many pages of my diary to what he said upon a score of topics in which I was interested.

At Bandar Abbas we kicked our heels in the Persian quarantine station for nine days, bathing for hours at a time in the sea. The drinking-water was brackish; the surroundings barren; the rooms bare of furniture. Our fellow prisoners were all Indian or Persian deck-passengers. One Persian merchant, who had his own servant, invited us to take our meals with him, refusing any payment. We ate with him, though from a separate dish:

he taught us the etiquette of the table or, rather, of the *sufra*—the cloth spread before us upon the floor at meal-times. He and other Persians spent hours teaching us Persian; it was our first experience of Persian hospitality and the best possible introduction to their country.

Released from quarantine we stayed as guests with the British Consul, Lt. C. H. Gabriel of the Indian Political Department: we met his Russian colleague, M. Owseenko, who held a watching brief for his Government and was exceedingly anxious to ascertain our identity and our plans of which, in fact, we had made no secret. The Anglo-Russian agreement for the division of Persia into spheres of interest had not yet been signed and each Power watched the other jealously. The ideal of the Government of India was an independent Persia or, if that should be impossible, a country which in the east and south should be predominantly under British influence. The Foreign Department of the Government of India staffed and paid half the cost of the Consulates at Meshed, Sistan, Bam and Kerman, Bandar Abbas, and elsewhere: its representatives were, like many of our Consular Officers in Turkey at the time, military officers, really good linguists, active travellers, and well able to exercise at least as much weight as the representatives of Russia. Many of them, such as Sykes, Lorimer, and Kennion, have left their mark upon Persian literature. I already harboured the half-formed ambition to be one of their number: Sir Louis Dane, then Foreign Secretary, had encouraged me on the single occasion on which I had met him to hope that I might one day do so, if I could win my spurs in the field before and not after I joined the Department. I had no family connexions, and very few relatives had ever served, in India: I could not hope, he said, to be nominated unless I had first done something which would give me a very strong claim. This was my chance.

Cruikshank had no such ambition. He loved the Regiment as dearly as I did but, unlike me, he was already bent on marrying and 'settling down'. Either he or I would be the next Adjutant: the Colonel had made it clear that either of us would be satisfactory to him but there was not a career for both of us in the Regiment. The Adjutant would have a prior right to nomination to the Staff College: both of us could not expect to go there: we must settle between ourselves which should stay. Before we left Ambala we had reached a decision but, as close friends, we decided to make a last long journey together before the parting of the ways. He was killed while serving with our linked Regiment, the 34th Sikh Pioneers, in the second battle of Ypres on May 27th, 1915.¹ (Between 1914 and 1918 nearly half of all the officers and men whom I had known at Ambala fell in war, or as Sikhs say, 'were of use'.)

Such being the background of our relationship we could not have been better matched for the trip. I excelled with the plane table and he with the camera, I with a rifle and he with a shot-gun. Both of us were inured to long marches and could climb barren hills for many hours a day without fatigue; we were alike content to live on lentils and rice, dates, and unleavened bread, supplemented by whatever we could shoot; we brought no camp-beds or tables with us and only one 40-pound tent, which we pitched only when rain seemed likely, for it could not fail to catch from afar the eye of potential thieves.

We left Bandar Abbas for Lar early in March with one Persian servant, who rode a donkey and led or drove a mule to carry all our kit. At the first stage on the road we were overtaken by a mysterious Persian, mounted upon a single mule, who announced that he would keep us company. Suspecting him to be an agent of the Russian Consul and, in any case, disliking the look of

¹ MacMunn, *History of the Sikh Pioneers* (1936).