

# IRAJ AFSHAR: A SCHOLAR AND HUMANIST (1925–2011)\*

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It is a daunting task to set on paper the importance of Iraj Afshar and his contribution to the field of Iranian Studies in the twentieth century. His staggering publication record, his attention to scholars and the scholarship in the field, his editorial skills, and his travels all made him a unique and outstanding scholar. Originally from a prominent family in Yazd, he was born in Tehran and first attended a Zoroastrian primary school, then entered the Shapur middle school in Tajrish, and finally the Zoroastrian Firouz Bahram High School. His father, Dr Mahmoud Afshar, received his doctorate in Law and Political Science from Switzerland and was a man of letters who established *Ayandeh* (The Future), one of the earliest and most important scholarly journals dedicated to the field of Iranian Studies. He also endowed his wealth to establish the Dr Mahmoud Afshar Foundation, which preserves and promotes the Persian language, literature, and history of Iran. The Dekhoda Institute and the Tehran Archaeological Institute and Academy of Persian Language and Literature are among the most prominent institutions located on the premises of the foundation on Vali-ye Asr Avenue.

In 1949 Afshar received his Bachelor of Law degree from the University of Tehran. By then he had already started working with the journal *Jahan-e Now* (The New World) and was immediately hired as a teacher by the Ministry of Culture. In 1951 he became the bibliographer for Tehran University's Law library. Meanwhile he had also become chief editor of the journal *Mehr*. In 1952 he established the influential journal *Farhang-e Iranzamin*, which was dedicated to Iranian Studies. The authors of this 30-volume periodical were some of the twentieth century's leading Iranian and foreign scholars in that field. From the very first volume, the works of scholars such as Rudolph Macuch, an expert on the Mandeans, and Sir Dennis Ross, who worked on early British travelogues, were translated and published in that journal.

Between 1953 and 1955 Afshar also became chief editor of *Sokhan* (Utterance) and *Ketab-e Mah* (Book of the Month). The first was an important medium for those interested in literature and poetry, especially the

modernists of the time. The latter was dedicated to reviewing recently published books. Iraj Afshar also had a hand in *Bongah-e Tarjomeh o Nashr-e Ketab* (Institute of Translation and Book Publication) between 1956 and 1962, which was dedicated to the translation of world literary masterpieces into Persian. From 1957 to 1979 he was chief editor of *Rahnameh-ye Ketab* (Book Guide) in cooperation with Ehsan Yarshater. This journal dealt with what both Afshar and Yarshater were concerned with at the time, notably the art of the book and book publishing. During this time Afshar also founded a new journal dedicated to the study of manuscripts at the Central Library of the University of Tehran along with Mohamad Taghi Daneshpajuh. Much of what the University of Tehran possesses in terms of manuscripts and copies of manuscripts from around the world is the result of the diligence and hard work of these two bibliophiles and scholars of the manuscript.

After the Iranian Revolution, Iraj Afshar revived *Ayandeh* and continued to publish the journal until 1993. At a time of drastic changes and upheavals, this journal was an important outlet for scholars, both the established scholars at the time of the Pahlavi period and the younger and upcoming scholars wishing to publish their research. In more recent years he contributed to the important *Nameh-ye Baharestan* (Book of Baharestan), dedicated to manuscript studies with an international board of editors, under the editorial directorship of Nader Motallebi Kashani. These are just some of the major journals that Iraj Afshar was involved in, but there were many more.

In 1969 he became an Associate Professor of History at the University of Tehran. His travels in Iran and attention to documents, letters, and primary sources made Afshar an excellent scholar in the field. The number of edited primary sources is not known but there are plans to complete a count of these works by Afshar

\* The title is taken from a book that Iraj Afshar and I edited, entitled *Scholars and Humanities: Iranian Studies in Henning and Taqizadeh Correspondence, 1937–1966* (Costa Mesa 2009).

in the near future. He had an interest in early Persian geographical treatises such as the old translation of the *Masalik va Mamluk* of Estakhri that he published in 1968. One of Afshar's last published works was *Ahd-e Hesam*, a travelogue to Lorestan and Khuzistan from the time of Fath 'Ali Shah Qajar, published in 2011. These examples provide the range of Iraj Afshar's interest.

Another of Afshar's preoccupations was his study and publication of the life and learning of leading Iranian scholars. One can point to Mohammad Qazvini's life and work, which Afshar collected and published, along with his notes, in 10 volumes. He later published Qazvini's other remaining writings in many more volumes; these are essential for understanding the Persianate encounter with the West and Western study of the Iranian world. Also among these was Seyyed Hasan Taqizadeh's biography *Turbulent Life* (*Zende-gi-ye Tufani*), providing an important oral history of early twentieth-century Iran as well as 15 volumes of Taqizadeh's articles and notes. Afshar also published much about the Qajar period in new documents, including the daily news of the Constitutional Revolution.

It was Afshar's habit to take daily notes and write about all that he read, often including the people and documents that he encountered. Much of these observations have been published as "Tazeh-ha o Pareh-haye Iranshenasi" (New Bits of Iranian Studies) in the journal *Bokhara*, under the editorship of Ali Dehbashi. Important books and journals, letters to him from scholars around the world, documents such as those from the late Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammad Mossaddeq, rare pictures, and Anne Lambton's letters to him were published in many volumes of *Bukhara*.

Another important aspect of Afshar's scholarship was his travels through Iran and the Persianate world. Some of these travelogues have been published as *Golgasht dar Vatan* (Travels in the Homeland) or *Safar-namcheh* (Little Travelogue). These works and his understanding of geography of the Iranian Plateau made him an excellent editor of geographical treatises and also provided a good understanding of Iranian history and landscape. For close to six decades Iraj Afshar had travelled across the landscape of Iran and the surrounding regions, sometimes walking and hiking, sometimes on donkeys and horses, and other times in his car or SUV. His companions included Manuchehr Sotoodeh, Abbas Zaryab Kho'i, and Bastani-Parizi, among others. I and a few other colleagues also had the privilege of travelling with Iraj Afshar. What made

these trips special was that one was not concerned with an exact itinerary and schedule. He had a notebook with the names and phone numbers of local notables with whom travellers usually stayed, sampling the local food and examining the latest finds and publications in that region. In this way Afshar was well connected with what was happening in Iran, making him unique in this regard.

In turn Iraj Afshar developed an extraordinary archive of photos and notes on cities, monuments, epigraphy, and people. He probably took note on and read most of the early Arabic and Persian inscriptions in Iran, found on mosques and buildings that once existed or that still stand. The archives and epigraphical notes are awaiting study and publication and they will provide valuable data on writing in Iran from the early Islamic to modern times. These form part of the *Iraj Afshar Research Trove*, now being held at the Center for the Great Encyclopedia of Islam in Tehran.

Lastly, Iraj Afshar was someone who helped all those who were interested and curious about Iran, the Persianate world and its history and culture. Scholars residing as far afield as the USA, Europe, Japan, and India visited or corresponded with him, seeking his knowledge about matters pertaining to Iranian Studies. He often collaborated with younger scholars, something that endeared him to the new generation of scholars, both Iranian and non-Iranian.

Iraj Afshar above all admired Taqizadeh who appeared to have impressed him the most, along with Ibrahim Pourdavud, the first native scholar of ancient Iranian languages. Both Ehsan Yarshater and Iraj Afshar were discovered and mentored by Taqizadeh, who himself was a remarkable scholar of his time. Pourdavud brought a native as well as a European learning to a subject that was in its infancy in Iran in the twentieth century. One gets the sense that Iraj Afshar emulated the path that Taqizadeh had laid before him for the love of his country and for learning. Afshar sacrificed much of the niceties of life in return for learning and endeavouring to understand the Iranian world. He is credited with writing, editing, or co-editing over 260 volumes, several more that are in press, and more than 1000 articles and notes—the impressive heritage of a great humanist and scholar.

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