

1 The travelogues and their scribes

1.1 Travelogues as Historical and Social Records

Travelling diverse geographical landscapes affords individuals exposure to an array of alternative lifestyles, culinary practices, commercial activities, cultural nuances, linguistic diversity, amongst others. Historically, travellers undertook the meticulous documentation of their peripatetic experiences through the medium of travelogues and journals. However, with the advent of technological progress in recent decades, this erstwhile literary undertaking has undergone a paradigm shift, with the task of recording now predominantly delegated to the ubiquitous tools of cameras and smartphones. Consequently, the manifestation of conventional travelogues in contemporary times has become increasingly rare. Notwithstanding this technological transformation, travelogues persist as invaluable repositories, offering profound insights into the societal fabric and existential nuances of diverse geographical locales throughout distinct historical epochs.

Travel literature, particularly in the Islamic world, underwent a significant transformation from earlier periods, where it was often a byproduct of religious pilgrimage, commerce, and diplomacy. Before the 15th and 16th centuries, travel narratives were predominantly shaped by individuals journeying from one cultural region to another, such as the renowned accounts of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, Ibn Jubayr, and Ḥalabî. These explorers were primarily concerned with mapping the broader expanse of the known world and often emphasised encounters between different cultures. In contrast, as we move into the early modern and modern periods, travel literature increasingly reflects journeys within specific regions, often by those who were not foreign but rather native to the areas they described. This shift marks a pivotal moment in the evolution of travel writing, where it became more introspective and focused on domestic landscapes rather than solely on foreign territories.

Iran stands as no exception to this narrative. Travelogues scribed in languages other than Persian have garnered the attention of Western scholars, their accessibility augmented by linguistic congruence. The genre of travelogue writing, traditionally associated with foreign visitors, has transcended cultural and linguistic boundaries, finding expression among Persian speakers within Iran and neighbouring regions. In the case of Qajar Iran, the 19th century witnessed an explosion of domestic, regional, and foreign travel writing. The accounts produced during this period offer invaluable insight into the social, political, and cultural landscapes of the time, while also participating in the broader historical process of

national identity formation. Travelogues from this era, including those by figures like Mirzā Šāleḥ, were not merely descriptive; they played a role in shaping an emerging sense of Iranian identity amidst the pressures of modernity and foreign influence.

Paradoxically, despite their potential significance, travelogues by native Persian speakers had, until recent decades, escaped commensurate scholarly attention. This gap in scholarly engagement with Persian travel literature becomes particularly noteworthy when considering the critical role such writings played in the development of national consciousness during the Qajar period. As the Iranian state grappled with both internal and external challenges, the writings of individuals like Mirzā Šāleḥ and other contemporaneous diarists served as more than mere historical records; they became tools through which an evolving narrative of Iran's place in the world was articulated.

In what follows, I will introduce a journal called *Sketch of Persia* and another diary which was recorded around the same time by Mirzā Šāleḥ Shirāzi. The two accounts were chosen to complement each other and at the same time present a more balanced (an outsider and insider) perspective of Iran at the time. *Sketches of Persia* was published in two volumes; the first volume covers the mission of Sir John Malcolm to Iran up to Isfahan and the second volume from Isfahan to Tehran's court and beyond. In this edition and translation, I have resolved to include solely the first volume of "Sketches of Persia," complemented by the narratives of Mirzā. This decision is driven by the objective of offering a more expansive journey through Iran while simultaneously presenting a diversified perspective that juxtaposes the insights of both local and non-local observers. By doing so, I aim to illuminate the contrasts and nuances that emerge from the differing vantage points of indigenous and foreign perspectives as will be discussed further below.

The importance of juxtaposing these two narratives becomes even more pronounced when considering the broader context of Qajar Iran's historical trajectory. During this period, the Iranian state, under the Qajar dynasty, faced significant pressures from European powers, both in terms of territorial integrity and political autonomy. Travelogues, both foreign and domestic, often reflect these anxieties, and they may offer a window into how Iranian intellectuals and elites began to conceive of their national identity in the face of foreign encroachment.

1.1.1 *Sketches of Persia and its author*

Sir John Malcolm (1769–1833) is well-known for his diplomatic missions to Persia in 1801, 1806, and 1810, and as the author of the seminal work, "The History of Persia." However, Malcolm's achievements extend far beyond these notable missions. His most significant contributions for the British Empire were in India, where his work

left an indelible mark on the British administration and understanding of Indian society and culture.

Malcolm was born near Langholm in Dumfriesshire, the fourth son among seventeen children in a family deeply rooted in the Scottish Borders. At the young age of 12, he was taken to London by his uncle for an interview with the Directors of the East India Company. At India House, Malcolm was on the verge of being rejected, just as his uncle had expected, when one of the Directors addressed him, according to Kaye (1856: 8), asking “Why, my little man, what would you do if you were to meet Hyder Ali?” To this Malcolm replies “I would out with my sword, and cut off his head.” Rejoiced by the answer, the recruiter then responds “you will do, let him pass.” Malcolm, therefore, secured a commission as an ensign and set sail for India in 1783, landing in Madras at an early age and welcomed by the widow of his uncle, Gilbert Pasely (*ibid*: 9). His early years in India were marked by rigorous military service, including participation in the Third Mysore War (1790–1792) against Tipu Sultan, where he served with distinction in the Madras Army. Malcolm’s encounter with John Kennaway, the Resident at the Nizam of Hyderabad’s court, marked a pivotal moment in his career. Kennaway and his assistant, Graeme Mercer, inspired Malcolm to transition from military service to the realm of political administration.¹

According to the archival documents housed in the India Office Records, proficiency in Persian was a pivotal skill for serving in administrative capacities within the East India Company, a qualification Malcolm had successfully attained. This linguistic requirement was further institutionalised through the inclusion of Persian in the curriculum at colleges, such as Haileybury College, an institution dedicated to training recruits for the India Office and officers were encouraged and rewarded for excellence in acquiring the language.² Malcolm determined to excel, immersed himself in the study of Persian and Indian vernacular languages, which were crucial for a political officer in British India. His linguistic proficiency and understanding of local cultures enabled him to serve as a Persian interpreter when an officer proficient in the Persian language was needed to serve at Lord Cornwallis’ camp for the troops stationed with the Nizam.

Malcolm’s career was characterised by his close associations with some of the most prominent figures of his time, including the Marquess Wellesley, Richard

¹ See page 98 in Ann K. S. Lambton, “Major-General Sir John Malcolm (1769–1833) and ‘The History of Persia.’”

² See, for instance, IOR/Z/E/4/34/O47 discussing the rewards for proficiency in Oriental Languages including Persian, IOR/Z/E/4/40/O94 discussing encouraging the study of Persian by officers destined for Madras, and IOR/Z/E/4/42/P235 discussing measures for encouraging the Study of the Persian Language by officers, amongst many other documents.

Wellesley (1760 – 1842), the Governor-General of India, and Colonel Arthur Wellesley, later the Duke of Wellington. In fact, Lord Wellesley received the same Order, namely the Lion and Sun, from Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh as Malcolm did.³ His rapport with these influential leaders facilitated his rise within the British administration in India. Malcolm admired Wellesley’s comprehensive approach to governance and was profoundly influenced by his vision, which sought to integrate capable men into the administration to bring about significant reforms.

During his tenure in India, Malcolm was part of a cohort of colonial administrators, which included Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779–1859) as well as other significant figures such as Thomas Munro (176–1827), and Charles Metcalfe (1785–1846), who played pivotal roles in transforming India to what the East India and the Crown had in mind. They undertook monumental tasks such as mapping the land, building colonial infrastructure, and establishing irrigation systems for their purposes.

Malcolm also pursued intellectual tasks. He was deeply involved in the scholarly activities of his time, particularly in Calcutta, which was a hub of intellectual life in the late 18th century. The establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal by Sir William Jones (1746–1794) in 1784 aimed to introduce Eastern civilizations to the Western world, fostering a rich exchange of knowledge. Malcolm’s interactions with other scholars, such as the Sanskrit expert H.T. Colebrooke (1765–1837) and the erudite James Mackintosh (1765–1832) in Bombay, further enriched his understanding of Indian and Persian cultures. Despite the demanding conditions of military and administrative life, he diligently pursued his studies. His return to Britain on health grounds in 1794 provided him with the opportunity to attend classes in Edinburgh and engage with academic circles, a period he utilised to further his oriental studies. His dedication to learning was evident in his correspondence, where he expressed a profound appreciation for history and literature, particularly Persian poetry.

Malcolm’s scholarly endeavours culminated in the publication of “The History of Persia,” a comprehensive account that drew from his extensive travels and firsthand experiences. His Persian missions were instrumental in gathering the material for this monumental work. Malcolm’s approach to historical writing was characterised by a vivid narrative style and a deep understanding of Persian society, which he had observed closely during his diplomatic missions. His ability to relate historical events within the broader cultural and societal contexts of Persia rendered his work a valuable resource for both contemporary and future scholars.

To sum up, Sir John Malcolm’s contributions to the British administration in India and his scholarly work on Persia mark him as a figure of considerable historical significance. His ability to bridge the worlds of military service, political

³ Sir Harford Jones (1764 –1847), who was the Crown ambassador to Iran preceding Sir Gore Ouseley, refused to accept this Order. For a detailed discussion on this, see Wright (1979).

administration, and academic scholarship exemplifies the multifaceted nature of his achievements. Malcolm's legacy is not only reflected in the historical records of his time but also in the enduring influence of his work on the understanding and governance of India and Persia.

In his seminal work, *The Life and Correspondence of Major-General Sir John Malcolm*, extensively cited by scholars later publishing on Malcolm, such as Lambton (1995) and Wright (1979), Kaye asserts that *Sketches of Persia* was authored by John Malcolm.⁴ While it is essential to emphasise that the accounts detailed in *Sketches of Persia* are the product of John Malcolm's missions on behalf of the East India Company, there are specific anomalies that cast doubt on Malcolm's authorship of the book. Notably, the narrative refers to Malcolm in third person and even sometimes leaves him out from the accounts described, with discussions often occurring during periods when he was preoccupied with other responsibilities. Furthermore, the book contains aspects that question Malcolm's authorship. For example, a footnote in the original versions of the accounts reveals criticism directed at Sir John Malcolm for failing to credit the original author on several occasions and for failing to acknowledge the original author's intellectual property. In Chapter VI, the footnote addresses an anecdote about an Arab woman's perception of Britain, where the author asserts:

This story has been told by Sir John Malcolm, in his history, in illustration of some of his facts or opinions; but he has taken this, and many other equally good things, from me, without ever acknowledging them; I shall, therefore, stand on no ceremony when it suits my purpose to reclaim my property.

Moreover, a comparison of John Malcolm's letters to his wife, preserved in the National Library of Scotland (see the volumes containing Malcolm's letters, Acc.12935), reveals discrepancies in the names used. For instance, in a letter dated May 10, in which he describes the opulent date palms along the coast, Malcolm writes:

As an instance of this fact I shall repeat an anecdote which I was told when last at Abusheher. An Arab woman inhabitant of that town had gone to England with the family of Galley who had long resided in Persia – After remaining there a few years she returned and all Abusheher crowded round her.

⁴ Refer to Vol. I, the footnote on page 107, or Vol. II, where he states ““the Sketches of Persia” were not published before 1827. They were written at intervals during Malcolm's residence at Hyde Hall. But his studies were interrupted by occasional tours, undertaken partly with the object of visiting friends and partly for the purpose of increasing his stock of information relative to the countries of the West.” (422–423)

In contrast to the content of Malcolm's letter, the surname of the family with whom the Arab woman travels to England is noted as Mr. Beauman (refer to Chapter VI of this volume).

Although numerous anecdotes featured in the *Sketches* are echoed in Malcolm's notes and diaries, the inconsistencies and certain assertions within the *Sketches*, as previously examined, cast doubt on Malcolm's authorship. Nonetheless, it is unequivocal that it was Malcolm's missions that created the opportunities for the exchanges which ultimately shaped the *Sketches* into its present form.

1.1.2 *The significance of the book*

Engaging with texts such as those delineated in *Sketches of Persia* provides a profound scholarly vantage point to apprehend the intricate tapestry of social, cultural, and political dimensions within Persian society in the early 19th century. These narratives serve as invaluable historical artifacts, elucidating not merely the palpable structures and events of the period but also the underlying ethos and dynamics that moulded individual lives and shaped the broader societal panorama.

Such texts offer a nuanced portrayal of the socio-economic fabric prevalent in Persian society of the time. The author's accounts around the activities of Sir John Malcolm's mission delineate the stratified nature of Persian life, ranging from the opulence of royal courts and the affluent urban elite to the modest circumstances of rural villagers and nomadic tribes and their treatment by the ones in power. Descriptions of sumptuous palaces, bustling markets, and the daily routines of merchants underscore the economic vitality and cultural diversity that characterised urban centres such as Tehran and Isfahan. For instance, insights into the frugal habits and cautious dealings of merchants, such as their secret language which acted as their security (see, for example, chapter XIII) reveal not only their economic prowess but also the prevailing ethos of prudence and self-preservation amidst a volatile political climate.

Additionally, the accounts serve as windows into the cultural milieu of the period, showcasing the elaborate fabric of traditions, beliefs, and artistic expressions that defined Persian identity. Malcolm's narratives abound with references to architectural marvels like mosques, historical landmarks, such as Persepolis, and bathhouses, symbolic not only of the grandeur of ancient rulers, as far back as the Achaemenids, all the way to more recent ones, such as Shāh 'Abbās, but also of their aspirations to secure enduring legacies through monumental constructions. Anecdotal depictions of social customs, literary pursuits, and the reverence for historical figures, such as Nushiravān and Hārūn al-Rashid exemplify the interweaving of cultural narratives with moral teachings and the collective memory of the Persian populace.

Another pivotal significance of the volume for the field of Persian studies, as well as the history of the region in general, is that it provides critical insights into the political dynamics and power structures of the time. Accounts of court intrigues, royal edicts, and interactions between rulers and subjects illuminate the intricacies of governance and authority in Persia. Contrasting portrayals of leaders such as Āqā Moḥammad and Shāh ‘Abbās not only delineate their distinctive leadership styles but also underscore the enduring repercussions of their policies on societal coherence and stability. Furthermore, discussions on tribal allegiances, regional loyalties, and the influence exerted by external entities such as European diplomats furnish a comprehensive framework for comprehending the geopolitical landscape that shaped Persian politics during Malcolm’s era.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the study of texts akin to those noted in *the Sketches of Persia* is significant for unravelling the manifold layers of Persian society during the historical epoch under scrutiny. These narratives serve as invaluable founts of knowledge that bridge the temporal chasm between past and present, furnishing scholars with a thorough understanding of the social, cultural, and political dynamics that moulded Persian identity and governance. By delving into these texts, one not only gains insights into the material conditions and intellectual pursuits of the period but also encounters the enduring legacies of personalities and institutions that persistently resonate within Persian cultural memory. Thus, the significance of studying such texts lies not only in their historical veracity and literary merit but also in their capacity to illuminate the enduring complexities of human society and the perpetual quest for meaning and identity across temporal and spatial boundaries.

1.2 Mirzā Šāleḥ Diary of Persia

In the realm of academic inquiry, there has been a discernible surge in interest among scholars specialising in Persian studies, particularly within the domains of Iranian history and cultural analysis, towards the utilisation of Persian-authored travelogues. These sources have emerged as pivotal conduits, furnishing an enhanced understanding of the internal dynamics of Iranian society. Notably, the intrinsic linguistic affinity of the travelogue authors, being native Persian speakers, facilitated unencumbered communication with local denizens, mitigating linguistic barriers. While these works proffer a distinctive perspective on various facets of quotidian practices within Iranian society when compared to narratives authored by non-Persian speakers, their potential for scholarly exploration remains significantly under-realised. Notably, numerous unedited manuscripts of Persian travelogues, documenting journeys both within Iran and abroad, languish within

the repositories of Special Collections in universities globally, representing untapped reservoirs of historical documentation. Prior to the twentieth century, the Safavids and Qājār periods were two major eras when it seems the documentation of journeys were very popular as evident from the identified travelogue manuscripts (see for instance, the travelogues by Ṭabāṭabāie Neẓām al-‘Olamā Tabrizi (19th century),⁵ Reẓā Qoli Mirzā (19th century),⁶ the grandson of Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh, Farhād Mirzā (late 19th century),⁷ Mirzā Khānlar Khān-e E’teṣām al-Molk (late 18th century)).⁸

Persian travelogues documenting journeys within Iran offer a conspicuously untarnished, non-exotic, non-Orientalist, and non-colonialist representation of both internal and external affairs. Beyond disseminating general information, these chronicles intricately detail the idiosyncratic activities and peculiarities of local denizens, consistently avoiding the infusion of exotic flavours prevalent in many non-Persian travelogues. Notably, certain travelogues of this genre were commissioned by foreign travellers and envoys embarking on excursions to Iran, who judiciously engaged literate Iranians to accompany them. For these discerning individuals, the travelogues served as more than mere recollections of their journeys; they functioned as invaluable repositories of information elucidating Iran’s geographical contours, societal conditions, and cultural intricacies. The compilation of such comprehensive insights underscores the imperative for these travellers to garner an in-depth understanding of the society that framed their missions.

Remarkably, these travelogues extend a comparable service to contemporary observers, acting as conduits that transport readers through temporal and spatial dimensions, providing first-hand and meticulous descriptions of the landscape and its inhabitants in bygone eras. Beyond the role of mere chroniclers, these textual artifacts constitute repositories of detailed depictions, transcending temporal constraints and offering vivid portrayals of centuries past. Consequently, they serve as discerning lenses, affording contemporary readers insights into the societal conduct of historical epochs. Such nuanced comprehension, in turn, not only facilitates an understanding of historical events but also enables scholarly inquiries aimed at bridging gaps in our knowledge across diverse domains, including societal stratifications, economic structures, trade network routes, local consumption patterns, transactions involving lands and businesses, indigenous customs, prevalent health

⁵ The travelogue is called *Safarnāmeḥ-ye Ġaravi* compiled in 1896. For an edition of the travelogue, see Azizian (2018).

⁶ There are various edited versions of this manuscript which was originally compiled in 1834.

⁷ He was the son of ‘Abbās Mirzā (1818–1888). This travelogue is known as *Hedāyat al-Sabil va Kafāyat al-Dalil* which was completed around 1876 and describes his journey to Medina. For an edition, see Tabatabaie (1987).

⁸ Edited versions of his travelogues were published in a collection edited volume by Manuchehr Maḥmudi in 1972.