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THE PERSIANS. LOST CIVILIZATIONS Geoffrey Parker and
Brenda Parker, Reaktion Book, 2017, 208 pages

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The Persians. Lost Civilizations, by Geoffrey and Brenda Parker is the second of the series of Reaktion Books Ltd, following the publication of *Indus. Lost Civilizations* by Andrew Robinson. The publisher defines the general purpose of the series to “explore the rise and fall of the great civilizations and peoples of the ancient world. Each book considers not only their history but their art, culture and lasting legacy and asks why they remain important and relevant in our world today.”

In a brief preface, the authors further explain that the “book will examine the country’s ancient civilization and consider the ways in which the memory of it has persisted through the ages. Although in one sense ‘lost,’ it has throughout its history been many time ‘found’ and has left its mark on the country as it is today (15).”

The authors seem to make a passing effort to clarify the publisher’s statement of the meaning of “lost civilization” by attempting to qualify the title. While the historical memory of the Persians may have been “lost” or “found” from time to time, yet the fact remains that Persian history has had continuity throughout its longevity, even when it was overwhelmed by its conquerors such as Alexander the Great (356-323 BC.), the Islamic invaders of the 7th century or the Mongol hordes of the 13th century. At best these centuries became known as

the “silent centuries,” when Persians found it necessary to conform and adapt themselves to the new language and religion of their Arab conquerors.

The Manuscript

The Persians begins with a scanty chronology of four pages (total 52 entries), a preface entitled “Lost and Found” in three pages, followed by sixteen short chapters and an equally brief conclusion (“Power and Paradise”) of less than three pages. It also has a reference section at the end where chapter notes and a bibliography, foremost of secondary English sources (total 49 entries) are provided. Although the text is entitled *The Persian. Lost Civilizations*, it is foremost a history of pre-Islamic Persia with inadequate emphasis on Iran’s Islamic and modern history.

The first nine chapters are entirely on Iran’s pre-Islamic past, particularly the Achaemenid Dynasty (c. 550-330 BC.) and its founder Cyrus the Great who is covered at length in chapters two, three, and four and referred to in nearly all the remaining chapters of the book. The final eighty pages begin with chapter ten and relate the arrival of the Arabs in Iran. In just twelve short pages the authors cover over 800 years of Islamic Persia from the advent of Islam in the seventh to the rise of the Safavids in the sixteenth century. While chapter ten attempts to bridge the historical gap, it is woefully inadequate and does not sufficiently examine the rise of Shi’ism and the development of Iran’s Shi’i tradition which is an integral part of the Persian national identity today.

Chapter eleven, “From Persepolis to Samarkand: The Persian legacy in Central Asia,” traces the influence of Persia into Central Asia and the entire Transoxiana from the Achaemenid period to the times of Timur (Tamerlane or Timur the lame, 1336-1405) in the fourteenth century. The significance of the urban centers that were along the Silk Road and engaged in trade such as Samarkand, Balkh, Bukhara, Tashkent and Merv became the lifeline that connected China to Europe. The Chapter ends with a description of Timur and his dedication to raise Samarkand into a glorious city until his death in January 1405. The next chapter is a continuation of chapter eleven and traces the “Persian legacy in India from Timurids to the Mughals.”

In chapter thirteen (13 pages), the authors attempt to bridge the past with the present by claiming that the Persian Empire of 2500 BC has survived and projects itself into the present. “Iran was ruled by a shah in the middle of the first millennium BC, and in the twentieth century AD the ruler was still a shah (148).” The chapter regrettably lacks in both content and substance. Iran became the center of interest to British and Russian rivalries decades before the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, and not in 1859 as the authors claim (149). To be more precise, British interests in Iran initially dates back to the East India Company that first moved into India and then established trade relations with Iran under Shah Abbas the Great in the early 16th century. Beginning in the 19th century, British interest in Iran was renewed as a reaction to French intrigues. In 1805 the French under Napoleon Bonaparte were the first who moved into Persia to form an alliance with the Shah in order to gain access to India. The French signed the 1807 Franco-Persian Alliance with Fath Ali Shah (1798-1834) against Russia and Great Britain. However, the alliance lasted until 1809 when the French reconciled their differences with Russia. The British who felt threatened by the Franco-Persian Alliance sent Sir Harford Jones-Brydges as minister plenipotentiary to the court of Fath Ali Shah in 1807 and shortly thereafter they appointed their first permanent ambassador, Sir Gore Ouseley, to the Court of Persia. Hence the British had come to maintain Persia as a buffer state, for the purpose of protecting their jewel colony of India against foremost the French and then the Russians.

Numerous British and European concessioners had come pouring into Iran during the second half of the 19th century. However, unlike what the authors claim, the initial search for oil in Iran was not of direct interest to the British government but to the private concessioners who were hunting for opportunities across the region. One such entrepreneur was William Knox D’Arcy who managed to secure a concession despite British efforts to undermine his efforts due to their sheer dislike for the man who was considered arrogant and defiant. This too was accomplished not in the 19th century but rather in the early 20th century. The D’Arcy concession was signed in 1901 and oil was discovered in 1908. D’Arcy was a private entrepreneur and the British government only

became interested in Persian oil because of the impending World War I and the increasing need for oil as British war ships were engaged in switching from the use of coal to oil. In 1909, only a year after the discovery of oil, the London based Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) was formed in which the British government managed to gain its share of the flow of oil.

The Parkers also refer to Morgan Shuster, “the American representative to the Persian government,” and author of *The Strangling of Persia* (1912). But they make no reference to the Persian Constitutional Revolution of 1906 which is perhaps one of the most significant and historic events in modern Persian history. Morgan Shuster was invited by the Persian Government to set Iran’s finances in order following five years of financial chaos during the Constitutional period (1905-1911). He was to serve as the Treasurer-General of Persia and this was approved by both the British and the Russians. However, once in Iran he realized that with direct Russian interference in Iran’s internal affairs, he is unable to initiate change. When he was finally dismissed from his responsibilities, Morgan Shuster recounted his experience in *The Strangling of Persia*. The Iranian Constitutional Revolution is important because it was an attempt to bring under control the unscrupulous power of absolutism that the authors casually refer to as having provided “continuity” to Persian history.

A significant portion of the twentieth century Persian history after World War I (1918) to the Islamic Revolution (1979) is hastily assembled in less than nine pages. However, there is no mention of the coup d’état itself that brought Reza Khan and Sayyad Zia to the center stage of Persian politics, not to mention the controversy that surrounded British influence in orchestrating the coup of 1921. Reza Khan’s meteoric rise to power and his efforts to promote himself as the Shah of the new Pahlavi dynasty, is only briefly mentioned followed by Reza Shah’s reforms and modernization programs. This was compounded with a nationalism centered on Persian history and culture.

Reza Shah was forced to abdicate in 1941 due to his pro-German sentiments and replaced by his young son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The next thirty eight years of the Pahlavi rule is briefly covered by touching on the nationalization of the Iranian oil under Dr. Mossadeq in 1951. From there the authors jump to the

celebrations of 1971, when the Shah's efforts to revive "the glories of ancient Persia and its Aryan past" (154) led him "to hold a great celebration of the 2,500th anniversary of the foundation of the Persian Empire by Cyrus the Great (155)."

Ignored in the chapter are events between the nationalization of Iranian oil (1951), the Shah's White Revolution (1962) which led to the June 1963 demonstrations following the arrest of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the Shah's final departure from Iran in January 1979. The authors totally ignore the rise of social and political movements that caused the eventual fall of the Pahlavi dynasty. The brief and simplistic analysis of these crucial years is no explanation of the realities of the complex situation that prevailed.

Chapter fourteen is perhaps the most ambiguous with numerous incorrect and inconclusive assumptions and with very little scholarship to support. It attempts to demonstrate the transition from the departure of the Shah in January 1979 and the return of Ayatollah Khomeini to Iran in February 1979, after fifteen years of exile. The chapter tries to bridge the gap between the Islamic Revolution and its Achaemenid tradition. The authors even draw a parallel by declaring that "while the Achaemenid past had been used by the Pahlavis as justification for their actions, the Islamic past was now being used as justification for the new regime. Just as the shah had looked back for his inspiration to Cyrus, so Khomeini looked back for his to the Prophet Muhammad (164)."

The Shia revival of the 20th century is linked to Sayyid Mujtaba Mirlawhi, better known as Navvab-i Safavi who after 1945 formed a radical Shia group known as Fida'iyān-i Islam (Devotees of Islam), willing to take up arms and wage a holy war against those whom they regarded as a threat to Islam. The authors, Geoffrey and Brenda Parker, refer to Shia Islam as "a national or nationalist phenomenon, and this is clearly seen as opposition to capitalism and to Western imperialism (165)." Within this context, Ayatollah Khomeini's role is presented as one who is "able to adapt Islamic teaching to the modern world and to give it a social message. It was in this way that Shia Islam was converted into an ideology. In this, Khomeini's mentor had been Ali Shariati, who maintained that Islam – not communism – was the answer to the evils of capitalism. (165-66)." This quotation is not palatable for the simple fact that Dr.

Ali Shariati was in total disagreement with the clerics in Qum and most of his disciples were the younger generation of mostly students, who gradually evolved into the Mojahedin Khalgh, the radical Islamists who combined Shi'ism and socialist thought to form a new ideology. After the Islamic Revolution of 1979 they were disavowed and rejected by Ayatollah Khomeini. They took up arms against the Islamic Republic and had to flee for their lives to find sanctuary in Iraq under Saddam Hussain.

The final pages of the chapter are even more confusing where the authors emphasize the significance of the province of Fars in southern Iran as central to Iranian history. "It was there that both the Achaemenid Empire and Iranian Islam had originated, and its holy shrines 'have always won Fars the reverence of lovers of the Prophet's household and the Shi'ites of the world (168)." This latter claim is also highly improbable and difficult to sustain. There are only a handful of academics who view Zoroastrianism, the pre-Islamic religion of Iran as compatible with Islam and Shi'ism and regard Cyrus the Great to be the two horned figure known as Zolgharnein (Dhul-Qarnayn) mentioned in sixteen verses of the Quran. This concept was foremost proposed by the Indian scholar Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958) and later supported by a number of Shia scholars and academics including Allameh Tabatabaei in his *Tafsir al-Mizan*, Ali Sami and recently by Korush Kamali Sarvestani. However, the general consensus today is that the figure of Zolgharnein cannot be clearly identified.

Chapter fifteen, "Lost in Translation," is more cultural than historic. It consists of eleven pages, four of which represent beautiful color plates – an Ardabil carpet, two pages of the *Shahnameh* (Epic of the kings), and a scenic view of Persepolis. The text relates to the Persian language, archaeological discoveries, The *Shahnameh*, the poet and philosopher, Omar Khayyam (c. 1048-1131AD), the twentieth century writer Sadeq Hedayat, his novel *Buf Kur* (The Blind Owl) and modern film makers of Iran. The chapter, while pleasant reading, is far too short and inconsistent. It lacks depth and academic vigor and does more injustice to the Persian heritage and culture than it promotes. What seems to have been exactly lost in translation is never fully explained. Finally in Chapter sixteen, "The First Superpower," of no more than four pages the authors raise the

question whether modern Persia can serve as a model for the contemporary world order. Again using the Achaemenids as an example and drawing upon the World Systems of Immanuel Wallerstein, they conclude that “to bring about a transformation from the complex and violent world of the early twenty-first century to a more peaceful and productive one, the great state that dominated the ancient world over two millennia earlier (i.e. the Achaemenids) could yet prove to have much to offer as a guide for the future of humanity (187).” Perhaps the authors are referring to the Persian administrative system of the Achaemenids based on tolerance, diversity, regional autonomy and cooperation which endured for centuries.

The Assessment

In general, the book is lacking in critical analysis of the historical development of Iran through its different phases. Often it seems that the authors were more driven by the desired outcome than by an in depth understanding of the circumstances that led to the endurance and resiliency of the Persians throughout history. The authors make no attempt to explain the reasons for the enduring resiliency and why despite numerous invasions the Persians were able to survive the onslaught – be it Greeks, Arabs, Turks, Mongols, Timurids, the Ottomans, the Afghans, and in more recent centuries the British and the Russians. An attempt to answer this question would have done more service and would have made it clear “why” the Persians were never “lost” as a civilization. Perhaps this also explains why the Persians have left behind a culture and legacy of survival throughout their long history.

The text is of a very general nature, has numerous historical gaps throughout and the target audience is unclear. However, it is engaging and easy to read and in 208 pages the authors try to integrate various aspects of Persian culture, religion, politics, and society into a total picture that represents almost 2500 years of Persian historical narrative. While this is a noble undertaking, it simply cannot be achieved without raising serious academic concerns.

The book is also uneven in its content. For example a topic such as Zoroastrianism is granted more coverage (in 16 different pages) than *Shi'ism* (in

9 different pages). Equally less coverage is granted to the Islamic Republic, considering its role since the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

While the endurance of any civilization depends on the lasting impact of its language and culture, Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (The Epic of the Kings) is only mentioned on ten different occasions (60, 86, 94, 120, 174-7, 176, 179) and Hafez is mentioned only once (178) with no reference to other great literary icons such as Sa'di and Rumi. Zoroastrianism, the Shi'a and the Islamic Republic are also mentioned a few times, but their significance in shaping Iranian history and culture remain less conspicuous.

Obviously the authors have no knowledge of the Persian language and refrain from using some of the excellent sources available in Farsi. The book is primarily based on secondary non-Persian, mostly English sources. However, the authors ignore a few fundamental and scholarly publications of the 21st century on the Persians that are widely in use. The one by Homa Katouzian entitled *The Persians: Ancient, Medieval and Modern Iran* (Yale University Press, 2009, 452 pages) is the most comprehensive study available. *The Persians* (Blackwell Publishing, 2005, 2007) by Gene R. Garthwaite is also a valuable source, now in its second edition. The most current is that of Richard Foltz, *Iran in World History* (Oxford University Press, 2016), which is a brief account in 151 pages. However, even Richard Foltz's study is more substantial providing a far more comprehensive and balanced account than that of the Parkers.

Finally, the literature cited in the text is often dated, the complexity of design and sophistication of analysis are wanting. The views of Persian history are patchy, with no contribution to the field or to Persian historiography. It is clear that the authors have deliberately stayed off controversial social and political issues that have plagued Iran for most of its 20th and 21st centuries. The cultural clash between pre-Islamic, Islamic and modern Persian history are issues that continue to haunt Iran today and unless these social and ideological differences are reconciled the problems will persist for decades to come.

The authors fail to offer a solid analysis of the political and social history of the Persians, and their insights are useful but not original. The book falls short of exploring the frontiers among numerous ethnic and religious diverse

communities that inhabit the region. Such an omission is serious, considering that throughout history Persia has been a mosaic of religious and ethnic diversity bound together by the common substance of history, heritage and culture.

While the authors continue to praise Iran for its remarkable historical legacy, and as inviting as Iran may seem to thousands of academics and tourists who hope to get a mere glimpse of this “lost civilization,” the possibility may seem less likely in the future, simply due to the prevailing politics of the region. However, this easy to read textbook could perhaps serve another purpose. It could become a favorite choice for tourist centers and hotel bookstands throughout Iran. The fact that the authors have visited Iran on multiple occasions in recent years, one can assume that they have established a cordial working partnership with the authorities. Having clearly stayed aloof from current politics, the book should be able to acquire the seal of approval for distribution and sale in Iran. For the general traveler, it can offer an entertaining account and a reasonable perspective on the history and civilization of Persia. If so, it will certainly access the market for which it most presumably was designed.