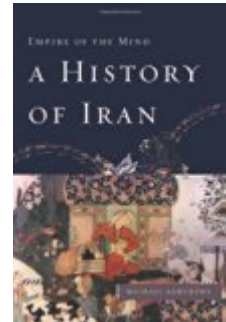




Michael Axworthy. *A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind.* New York: Basic Books, 2008. 352 pp. \$27.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-00888-9.



Reviewed by Paul Sprachman

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After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, a large number of Iranians joined the ranks of expatriates living in Europe and the United States. Suddenly uprooted and finding themselves in unfamiliar surroundings, some of them tried to redefine what it meant to be Persian or “Iran-ness.” This began as an effort to distance Iran from the images spread by television coverage of the hostage crisis. Iran-ness appears often in writing published outside of Iran to distinguish between the modern Shiite theocracy and the tradition of religious tolerance and cultural pluralism of ancient empires. The quest for a durable Persian-ness is also manifest in the modern state where it is fashionable for young people--many of them Muslim--to wear as a pendant the *faravahar*, the Zoroastrian religious symbol found on Achaemenid monuments and inscriptions.

Michael Axworthy’s book offers a broad understanding of Iranian-ness. Its subtitle comes from Winston Churchill (quoted on page 283), who said that future (post-1943) empires would be mental rather than physical constructs. Axwor-

thy seeks to define the idea of Iran from its very inception to--as part of the title of the last chapter puts it--“Ahmadinejad and the Iranian Predicament.” Many elements of Axworthy’s definition mirror the expatriate intellectual search for an Iran that differs from the contemporary state. Almost all of his work is devoted, therefore, to dynastic history, invasions by non-Iranians, discussions of Iranian religious exceptionalism (Zoroastrianism and Shiism), and appeals to Persian language and literature. In this way the author follows in the footsteps of veteran Western Iranists, like C. Edmund Bosworth, who speaks of “Persia’s peculiar national genius.”[1]

Axworthy’s history is a familiar catalogue of emperors from the pre-Islamic period and of Turkic rulers who rose to power after the Arab invasion. His book resembles the many Persian surveys called “compendia of histories” (*javame’ al-tavarikh*), a genre that had become so conventional that, by the early nineteenth century, Mohammad Hashem Asaf could parody it in his *Rostam al-Tavarikh* or “The Hercules of histories” (edited

by Mohammad Moshiri [1973]). Writers of collective history often shaped their works to meet the ideological needs of their patrons (usually rulers or court functionaries). As Reza Bigdeloo points out in *Bashangara'I dar tarikh-e mo'aser-e iran* (2001) (Archaism in the contemporary history of Iran), the tendency to downplay the role of Islam in Iranian history and to emphasize ancient kingship and empire was particularly apparent during the Pahlavi era (1925-79). The new dynasty, which comprised only two shahs, Reza and his son Mohammad Reza, recalibrated the Iranian calendar so that it went back 2,500 hundred years. To his credit in retelling what he calls the "violence and drama" of Iranian history, Axworthy plots a middle course (p. xi). He rejects simple explanations for such pivotal events as the 1941 removal of the first Pahlavi monarch, and puts part of the blame for the fall of Mosaddeq and the restoration of the Pahlavis on the prime minister's broad shoulders (this view was advanced recently in a work by Jalal Matini, *Negahi be Karnameh-ye Siasi-ye Doctor Mohammad Mosaddeq* [A Look at the political resume of Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq] [2005]). Axworthy also does not paint the results of the 1979 Revolution with one brush. *A History of Iran* might not be popular in some expatriate circles because it acknowledges that the rural and urban poor benefited from development efforts carried out under the Islamic Republic.

Literature is a defining trait of Axworthy's view of Iran-ness. His survey begins with epigraphy and ends with ideological and theological works that influenced the Iranian Revolution. He lets the inscriptions left by the Achaemenids speak for their cosmopolitan approach to empire; Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* for the revival of Persian culture that occurred two centuries after the Arab invasion; Omar Khayyam's quatrains for Persian rationalism; and Sadeq Hedayat's essays, short stories, and plays for the anti-Arab nationalism that became popular in the twentieth century. Occasionally Axworthy tries to set the literary record straight by showing what gets lost in Eng-

lish translations of classical Persian literature (for example, Khayyam on page 91 and Jalal al-Din Rumi on page 116). He also points to a Persianate culture that, from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, extended beyond the boundaries of modern Iran to India and Turkey.

Axworthy's is a work of history that looks forward when speaking of the past. He quotes a poem attributed to the thirteenth-century philosopher Naser al-Din Tusi, that says "anyone who does not know that he does not know is stuck for ever in double ignorance," and he notes that it "anticipat[es] Donald Rumsfeld by perhaps seven centuries" (p. xi). His discussion of Rumi, a contemporary of Tusi, laments that the great mystic has been "befriended by numb-brained New Agerly" (p. 116). The last chapter of the book, "From Khatami to Ahmadinejad and the Iranian Predicament," looks forward to the possibility of a rapprochement between the West (principally the United States) and Iran. In this chapter, Axworthy contrasts the historical Iran with its "diverse and profound intellectual heritage" and its "ancient and important Jewish presence" to the modern state, an aberration from the empire of the mind that can host Holocaust doubters (p. 290). So, more than a history of Iran, Axworthy's book is an argument against the use of force in solving the Iranian problem. When Western states take into consideration the facts and ideas he has marshaled in his history, they will bring a needed awareness of the tradition of Iranian reason and tolerance to future diplomacy.

Note

[1]. C. Edmund Bosworth, "The Persian Contribution to Islamic Historiography in the Pre-Mongol Period," in *The Persian Presence in the Islamic World*, ed. Richard Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 219.

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