

*Ehsan Yarshater*

## Obituary

### Professor Richard Nelson Frye (10 January 1920–27 March 2014) A Distinguished Scholar of Iranian Studies



The career of Professor Richard Frye in Iranian studies spanned more than half a century, during which time he was fully occupied researching, writing, and teaching. Our field is so much richer because of his dedication to it and his indefatigable efforts to advance Iranian studies in fields as diverse as history, historical geography, linguistics, art and archeology, numismatics, and sigillography.

Professor Frye was primarily known as a scholar of Iran and Iranian Central Asia, but the scope of his studies and contributions was much wider. His research interests comprised also Byzantine, Caucasian, and Ottoman history, Eastern Turkistan, ancient and medieval Iranian art, Islamic art, Sufism, Chinese and Japanese archeology, and a variety of Iranian and non-Iranian languages including Avestan, Old Persian, Middle Persian, Parthian, Sogdian, Khotanese, Bactrian, New Persian, Arabic, Turkish, and even Chinese, besides research languages including French, German, Italian, and Russian.

Professor Frye was born on 10 January 1920 of Swedish parents who immigrated to the United States and took up residence in Birmingham, Alabama, but later moved to Danville, Illinois. He entered the University of Illinois at Urbana to study philosophy, but was gradually drawn towards history and was introduced to Ottoman and Near Eastern as well as Far Eastern, Armenian, and Eastern European history. In the summer of 1938, one year before he received his BA, he attended a summer school at Princeton University and studied Arabic under Philip Hitti and Turkish under Walter Wright and Islamic Art with Mehmet Aga-oglu. Here he met Albert Olmstead, the author of *History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago, 1948), who stirred

in him an interest in Achaemenid history and the then recent discoveries made by Chicago's Oriental Institute in Persepolis. He visited the Oriental Institute several times, where he met Olmstead again, and made the acquaintance of George Cameron, who was studying the Persepolis Elamite Tablets, and Neilson Debevoise, the author of *A Political History of Parthia* (Chicago, 1938). He also took a seminar on Central Asia and Eastern Turkistan, which fostered a deep interest in the region.

For graduate studies he chose Harvard and entered the History Department in 1939, where he received an MA in History and Semitic Languages in 1941. About the same time, he was offered a stipend by Yenching Institute with the stipulation that he would study Chinese and Chinese history. In the summer of 1942 Frye attended the summer school at Princeton for the third time, where he studied Persian under Mehmed Simsar and with whom he began work on the translation of Narshakhi's *History of Bukhara*, which became the subject of his PhD dissertation at Harvard.

During World War II he was placed in charge of the Afghan Desk in Washington, DC. In 1942 he traveled to Afghanistan and stayed there for two years to monitor German and Japanese activities among Afghan tribes. From 1944 to 1945 we find him residing in Turkey to interview the Tatars who had arrived from Russia. Few scholars have found such diverse opportunities to visit so many places and to meet great scholars in varied fields of study.

Far from being a sedentary or abstract scholar, Frye, a true peripatetic researcher, more than satisfied his ambulatory urges, traveling from west to east and from north to south, making a point of visiting and studying first-hand the places which fell within the orbit of his studies. He traversed the arid lands and mountainous terrains between Cairo and Kabul, crossing Kerman and Baluchistan to visit Sistan and Kuh-e Khajeh; he marched through valleys and climbed mountains in Afghanistan to visit historical monuments; he suffered heat and thirst in crossing the Persian kavir to reach Biyabanak and Khor (the dialect of which he studied and published); and he passed through inhospitable lands in Central Asia and Chinese Turkistan to visit Buddhist and Manichean monuments.

He was one of the rare scholars who cover both fields of Iranian studies: pre-Islamic and Islamic. Since he was best known as a scholar of pre-Islamic Persian history and languages, one might be surprised to learn that one of the first articles he published was "Abu Muslim in the Abbasid Revolt" (*The Moslem World*, 37, 1947: 28–38); and the first book he edited was *The Near East and the Great Powers* (Cambridge, MA, 1951).

His *The Heritage of Persia* (London, 1962), which has become a classic, is an excellent introduction to the history and culture of ancient Iran, discussing its linguistic and ethnic variety, Iranian religious experience, Iranian art, and the course of Iranian history to the fall of the Sasanian Empire. The political history of the Sasanian dynasty in the third volume of the *Cambridge History of Iran* is also by his pen and is appended by a very useful listing of Sasanian kings with Middle Persian versions of their names, the Classical form of these names and the regnal years of Sasanian monarchs.

Professor Frye's epigraphical and sigillographical skills were demonstrated in *Sasanian Remains From Qasr-i Abu Nasr; Seals, Sealings, and Coins* (Cambridge, MA, 1973), edited by him with major contributions by Prudence Harper. The chapters which deal with the reading of the seal impressions, bullae, and ostroca found at the site were contributed by Frye. His *The Golden Age of Persia* (London, 1975) is in fact a sequel to his *The Heritage of Persia*. It deals with the history of Iran following the Arab conquest, the rise of Islamic Persian culture under the Saffarids and particularly the Samanids, and its flourishing under the Ghaznavids and the Saljuks up to the Mongol period. Later, Professor Frye published a fuller history of pre-Islamic Persia as *The History of Ancient Iran* (Munich, 1983), which pays particular attention to the history of Eastern Iran (the Kushans, the Hephtalites, and other peoples). Frye's *The History of Ancient Iran* and *The Golden Age of Persia*, put together, provide a narrative of Persian history until the mid-thirteenth century, which is far more up-to-date than many similar attempts.

Professor Frye's *The History of Bukhara* (Cambridge, MA, 1954), a translation of Narshakhi's *Tarikh-e Bokhara*, makes available to English readers a very important history of a major Iranian cultural center in Sogdiana. Altogether he authored, translated, or edited some sixteen books. But the bulk of his contribution can be found in his numerous articles and reviews, listed by Shapur Shahbazi in the *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, vol. 4 (1990), published "In honor of Richard Nelson Frye" (the first part edited by Carol Bromberg and Bernard Goldman and the second part by Oktor Skjaervø and Shapur Shahbazi).

Professor Frye was not only a prolific researcher and author, but also an active campaigner, promoting through his teaching as well as a number of project initiatives and administrative and semi-administrative undertakings the cause of Iranian and Central Asian studies. Remarkable among them were his revival in Shiraz (1974) of the Asia Institute founded by A. U. Pope and its *Bulletin*, and his helping to establish the Committee on Inner Asian Studies at Harvard (1983).

I should like to mention two features which I have admired in Professor Frye's writings. One is his open-mindedness about views and theories concerning Persian history and culture. As also happens in some other fields, there are many controversies in Iranian studies, which have occupied and preoccupied Iranologists for years. Most scholars are tenaciously attached to their own opinions, and consider differing views a sign of ignorance, aberration, or both. Friendships have been disrupted, blood has reached the boiling point, and harsh words and critical attacks have been launched against the holders of other views. Such are, for instance, controversies about the date of Zoroaster, the religion of the Achaemenids, the veracity of Darius in his inscriptions concerning his accession to the throne, which Herodotus repeats about the murder of Bardia (Smerdis), the youngest son of Cyrus, and next-of-kin marriages in ancient Iran. I never knew Professor Frye to condemn an opposing view in vituperative language. He always showed, on the contrary, openness to views other than his own in discussing such controversies. Very often he posed the question, pointed out different theoretical solutions, and left it at that. Frequently, his discussion ended with a question, pointing to an absence of dogmatic attitude.

The other feature is his treatment of the Central Asian history. The term “Central Asia,” so fashionable these days, is of recent invention. Earlier the region was called Turkistan on account of the gradual domination, from about the eleventh century, of Turkic tribes over the region, as one can see in the title of W. W. Barthold’s admirable *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion* (English trans., London, 1928), or else by its territorial components. The Soviet Union, interested in driving a wedge between the past of these regions and their Soviet status, welcomed the term as neutralizing the historical claims of the Persians and the pan-Turkist advocates alike. With the help of some Eastern European countries, Hungary in particular, it pushed to give the term a historical reality and persuade UNESCO to undertake a number of projects under this label. This is all very fine, as long as it does not deny or obscure the fact that the oldest historical layer of civilization, and one which shaped the course of the early history of the region and is still an important cultural element in the area, is Iranian. Professor Frye was at pains to point out this reality through his many articles and more recently his *The Heritage of Central Asia: from Antiquity to the Turkish Expansion* (Princeton, 1996), where the heritage of Sogdiana, Parthia, Bactria, Khwarazmia, and other areas in the region are discussed.

In fact, Professor Frye, throughout his career was a friend of Iran and Iranian peoples, whether they live in Persia, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kurdistan, Baluchistan, Caucasus, or in Diaspora. He lived up to the sense of the sobriquet Iran-dust “lover of Iran” that the late ‘Ali-Akbar Dehkhoda bestowed upon him in 1953 and which he had used since. But this is not a one-sided love; it is mutual. Iranians, in appreciation of his outstanding efforts on behalf of their history and culture, have come to love him as much as he loved them.

He was so attached to Iran that in his will he expressed his wish to be buried in Iran and in 2010 the Iranian government, in appreciation of his love for the country, dedicated a house in Isfahan to be used as the site of his grave.

Professor Frye and Dr. Eden Naby, an Iranian Assyrian cultural historian of Central Asia and the Middle East, were married on 5 April 1975 in Philadelphia. Had he not died at noon on 27 March, they would have been married thirty-nine years.

Professor Frye is survived by three of his four children, Nels Mishael Naby Frye, his son with Eden Naby, and Gurprasad Khalsa, and Robert G. Frye from a previous marriage, six grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

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