

Ehsan Yarshater

Obituary

Professor Amin Banani, 1926–2013: A Prominent Scholar of Iranian Studies



Professor Amin Banani was one of the pillars of Iranian Studies in the United States and his passing leaves a conspicuous and regrettable gap in providing instruction and guidance with respect to Iranian history and Persian literature. He could speak with authority about the entire field of Iranian Studies, even though his expertise did not extend to pre-Islamic Iranian languages and religions.

Amin Banani was a very successful scholar in the sense that he achieved all the things that a successful professor may aspire to accomplish. He authored books and articles, which were well received and benefited a large number of readers; he was also an effective and exceptionally successful instructor of Persian history, literature, and mysticism, and trained a number of excellent students, some of them now serving Iranian Studies as professors. He wrote well and his published works are distinguished by innovative ideas, thorough research, and a lucid style of writing.

Amin Banani was born on 23 September 1926 in Tehran in a Baha'i family. His father Mousa Banani with his elder uncle Eshaq Banani were partners in the business of making original dummies for musical records of Persian music and sending the dummies to England from which musical records were made and then sent to Iran for sale. Those who have played these records must remember the picture of a dog listening attentively to the sound of the record with the phrase "His master's voice" purporting the accuracy of the recording so that the dog could recognize his master's voice emanating from gramophone.

His mother was from Ardestan, a large village between Isfahan and Yazd, which had a fairly substantial Baha'i community.

Amin grew up in a household where recorded music was frequently played and this partly explains his fascination with music in general and much later with Wagnerian opera in particular. He would try to attend Wagnerian concerts whenever possible. I was a beneficiary of one of his trips to New York when he stayed a couple of days with me to attend the Wagnerian cycle offered at the Metropolitan Opera at the Lincoln Center.

Amin completed his elementary education at the Jamshid-e Jam Zoroastrian School in Tehran; in the general examination of the sixth grade for all schools in Tehran he came top with the highest marks. He then entered the prestigious Alborz School, popularly called American College, where he finished the first three years of high school in 1944.

During World War II Amin was sent to the United States to study. He was in a group that also included Firuz Kazemzadeh, later Professor of history at Yale University, Khodadad Farmarnfarmian, later Director of Plan Organization, and his brother Hafez Farmarnfarmian, later Professor of History at the University of Texas at Austin. He registered at Stanford University in northern California. He took various courses besides history and, as pointed out by Professor Kazemzadeh, absorbed like the proverbial sponge various branches of knowledge other than history. He graduated with a BA, majoring in history from Stanford University in 1947. During his study at Stanford he became familiar with western music and read philosophy and world literature. He obtained his MA from Columbia University in 1949 and returned to Stanford for his PhD degree, which he received in 1959.

In 1951 he married Sheila Wolcott, daughter of a distinguished Baha'i family and a sociologist who combined physical attraction with cultural interests.

In 1953 Amin and Sheila decided to answer the call of the authorities of their faith by volunteering to emigrate to Greece in order to propagate their faith as part of a ten-year plan that encouraged the migration of Baha'is to locations that did not have the minimum number of Baha'is necessary to form a Spiritual Assembly of nine individuals. In Athens Dr. Banani taught history at the Overseas Program of the University of Maryland in Athens until 1958 when his work permit expired.

Later he became an instructor at Stanford University and then taught as an Assistant Professor of Humanities at Reed College in Portland, Oregon from 1959 to 1961. From 1961 to 1963 he worked as a research fellow and Assistant Professor at Harvard University.

In September 1963 he was invited to UCLA by Professor Gustave von Grunebaum to establish a program of Persian studies by teaching himself Persian history and literature – a program that continued for years to come. From this time on UCLA became his academic home, and he trained a number of excellent students among whom one may mention Dr. Farzaneh Milani, Professor of Persian Literature and Women's Studies at the University of Virginia, and Dr. Juan Cole, Mitchell Collegiate Professor of History at the University of Michigan, enhanced by a daily informative web log, called *Informed Comment*.

In his efforts to establish Iranian Studies and to improve the program of Near Eastern Studies at UCLA, he shouldered a variety of responsibilities. Banani served

on the Board of Directors of the Middle East Studies Association of North America and on the Executive Council of the Society for Iranian Studies. He was Vice President of the American Association of Iranian Studies.

Professor Banani's writings exhibit the vast realm of his research. In 1961 he published *The Modernization of Iran*, a book which shows his research abilities and sound judgment. As the name of the book implies, it is about what Reza Shah did in the nearly sixteen years of his reign to bring Iran out of its medieval ways and culture and modernize the educational and judicial systems, starting a series of industries in the country, building the railroad from Khuzestan in the southwest to Bandar-e Shah, a Caspian port, and putting Iran well on the way to progress; the program was slowed by his forced abdication imposed by the American, British and Soviet forces which occupied Iran during the World War II in 1941 and could not tolerate an independent Iran that wanted to remain neutral. Professor Banani's *The Modernization of Iran* still remains after forty-two years the best book for that chapter of Iranian history and the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi despite many books on the subject.

Professor Banani's writings on Persian literature are also important and are distinguished by his imaginative research and innovative ideas. His essay in *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rumi*, edited by him and published in 1994 under the same title, tackles the most important aspect of Persian literature.

Professor Banani was among the first scholars who recognized the extraordinary qualities of Forough Farrokhzad's poetry and invited Jascha Kessler, an American poet, to join him in translating into English verse a selection of Farrokhzad's poetry. The book was published in 1982 in the Modern Persian Literature Series of the Center for Iranian Studies, Columbia University as *Bride of Acacias: Selected Poems of Forough Farrokhzad*. The book showed the extent of Professor Banani's knowledge of Persian literature that extended from classical to modern, as did his translation of the poems of Tahereh Qorrato'l-'Ayn, which he published in 2004 with Jascha Kessler and Anthony Lee.

In 1965 I invited Dr. Ruben Levy, Professor of Persian literature at Cambridge University, to prepare an abridged translation of the *Shahnameh* in prose. When it was ready I asked Professor Banani to go over it and also to write an Introduction for it. He did. All the reprints of this book carry his thoughtful Introduction and show his deep familiarity with Ferdowsi's epic.

Much later in life Amin Banani returned to the *Shahnameh*, this time by comparing it with the great western epic, Homer's *Iliad*. This comparison, which shows his profound familiarity with both great epics, later became the subject of one of his latest essays, published in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* and also elsewhere. In this essay he compares heroes of the *Shahnameh* with Greek heroes and gods whom we meet in the pages of the *Iliad*. Interestingly he concludes that while the Greek heroes and deities are not particularly keen on ethical principles, the Iranian kings and heroes with some exceptions generally are great patriots, fully conscious of their duty to preserve the integrity of the country, safeguard its frontiers, and defend the country against its enemies, the Turanians.

Banani is also the author of numerous articles such as “The Epic of Kings” (1967), “Islam and Its Cultural Divergence” (1971), “Iran Faces the Seventies” (1971) and “Individualism and Conformity in Classical Islam” (1977).

Professor Banani was a fortunate man in the sense that he accomplished almost everything that he desired. He had a very happy family consisting of his wife Sheila and their two brilliant daughters, Susanne and Laila, married to two Taslimi brothers Shidan and Mehran, respectively, who have set an example of generosity when it comes to assisting cultural programs. They established the lectureship at UCLA entitled the Taslimi Lectureship on Baha’i History and Religion in Iran with the help of the late Professor Hossein Ziai, the then Chair of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures. The first two lectures were offered by Professor Firuz Kazemzadeh of Yale University and Professor Banani. Now a permanent lecturer will continue giving the course.

A festschrift in honor of Professor Banani by his colleagues and other scholars and some of his former students was published in 2012, entitled *Converging Zones. Persian Literary Tradition and the Writing of History*, edited by Professor Wali Ahmadi, a former student of Professor Banani and now Professor of Persian Literature at the University of California, Berkeley.

Professor Banani was respected not only because of his scholarly work and academic publications, but also because of his gentleness, and his willingness at all times to assist and advise younger scholars and junior faculty as well as graduate and undergraduate students.

In vain one tries to come to the end of his distinguishing qualifications. I have not yet mentioned that he was a perfect host and a matchless cook of Persian dishes. His *sabzi polo mahi* (rice with herbs and fish) was legendary. He was a frequent visitor to fruit markets to buy the ingredients that he needed to cook dishes for his visitors.

On a personal note, once when I was in Los Angeles I happened to ineptly pour the contents of an inkpot on the suit I was wearing. In no time I became the possessor of an excellent tweed jacket in brown shades and an elegant suit made to order in Italy, a generous gift from Banani. I still have them and cherish them.

His subtle sense of humor could not fail to amuse his visitors. A semi-sarcastic smile sometimes accompanied his jokes.

The burial of Professor Banani took place on 30 July 2013 at the Woodlawn Cemetery of Santa Monica. Professor Kazemzadeh, Sheila, Susanne and Laila spoke about Professor Banani and his coffin was interred while a recording of Bach’s St. Matthew’s Passion was playing.

On 2 December 2013 a memorial meeting for Professor Banani was held at the UCLA Faculty Center organized by the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures. At this meeting Professor David Schaberg, Dean of Humanities at UCLA, Professor William Schniedewind, Chair of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, Professor Rahim Shayegan, Director of Iranian Studies, UCLA; Professor Firuz Kazemzadeh of Yale University; Professor Farzaneh Milani of University of Virginia; Professor Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak of the University

of Maryland; Professor Wali Ahmadi of the University of California, Berkeley; Professor Touraj Daryaei of the University of California, Irvine; Dr. Latifeh Hagigi of UCLA; and Professor Ehsan Yarshater, Director of the Center for Iranian Studies, Columbia University, paid homage to Professor Banani.

Columbia University