



ATKINSON, JAMES A.

ATKINSON, Dr. James A. (1780-1852), a notable British orientalist, a scholar of the Persian language and literature, and the translator of Ferdowsī's *Rostam o Sohrāb*, Neẓāmī's *Laylī o Majnūn*, the popular Persian romance of *Hātem Ṭāʾī*, and others. Atkinson was born in Durham on 9 March 1780, and demonstrated early on an exceptional talent for versification. He studied medicine in Edinburgh and London, and was appointed assistant surgeon in the Bengal establishment in 1805. He studied Persian in his free time and in 1810 began his verse translation of the story of Sohrāb. The work was published as *Sohrab, a Poem* in 1814 in Calcutta where a year earlier Lord Minto, the Governor General, had appointed Atkinson to the post of assistant assay master at the mint, a position he retained until 1828, except for two brief intervals, in 1818 when he took up the deputy chair of Persian in Fort William College, and the period 1826-27 which he spent in England. In 1817 Atkinson was also entrusted with the superintendence of the *Government Gazette*, the official British journal in India. The next year he published his edition of *Hātem Ṭāʾī: Hatim Taeē, a Popular Romance*, Calcutta, 1818. After 1823, when the government severed its formal ties with the journal, the *Gazette*—and the newly founded Press—were placed under his charge.

Atkinson spent the years 1828-33 in England where he completed his abridged verse and prose translation of the *Šāh-nāma*. The work, to which a revised version of *Sohrab* had been appended, was published by the Oriental Translation Fund in 1832, and won the Fund's gold medal. Four years later the Fund published Atkinson's verse translation in epitome of Neẓāmī's celebrated



romance under the title of *Laili and Mejnun* (1836). Meanwhile, Atkinson had returned to his duties in India, and in 1838 accompanied the British army of occupation into Afghanistan, where he remained stationed until the defeat and surrender of Dost Moḥammad in 1841. Atkinson retired in 1847 after forty-two years of active service, returned to England shortly afterwards and died of apoplexy on 7 August 1852.

Atkinson's translations from the *Šāh-nāma* suffer from his over-zealous attempt to prove Ferdowsī closer in substance and utterance to Western epic conventions than was generally realized. In *The Shah Nameh* which is an abridgment in verse and in prose, he employs a variety of meters and measures, creating an uneven pace and, consequently, a false impression of the *Šāh-nāma*. The work thus conveys little of the majesty and poetic air of the original.

Atkinson's other translations from Persian include *The Aubid: An Eastern Tale* (Calcutta, 1819), a verse translation of a contemporary Indian romance, and *The Customs and Manners of the Women of Persia and Their Domestic Superstitions* (Oriental Translation Fund, 1832), a loose prose translation of Āqā Jamāl K̄vānsārī's *Ketāb-e Koltūm Nana*.

Although these translations reveal the many pitfalls of pioneer work in the field, still they are a marked improvement over the cumbersome phraseology and elaborate diction of such late eighteenth-century translators of the *Šāh-nāma* as Joseph Champion. This tendency in turn reflects the departure in English Romanticism from the neo-Classical attitude towards Oriental literatures in general and towards epic poetry and poetic translation in particular.

In addition to his Persian translations, Atkinson is the author of two fascinating travelogues (*Expedition into Afghanistan* and *Sketches in Afghanistan*, London, 1842), many valuable essays of statistical and topographical importance in the *Gazette* and the *Press*, and other works that are outside Iranian studies.



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