



AVERY, PETER

AVERY, Peter (b. Derby, England, 15 May 1923; d. Cambridge, 6 October 2008), British scholar of Persian literature and history ([FIGURE 1](#)). Avery was born in Derby in northwest England, the son of an officer in the merchant navy. He began learning Persian while he was in India during World War II, serving in the Indian Naval Volunteer Reserve. From an early age he had a love of poetry and said later that he had wanted to learn Persian in order to read [Hafez](#) in the original. After the war, he took an honors degree in Persian and Arabic at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) of London University. This was followed in 1949 by employment in Iran as chief language training officer for the [Anglo-Iranian Oil Company](#) (AIOC).

For the next two years Avery was a close observer of the mounting political tensions in Iran and the public pressure for the nationalization of the oilfields. This was finally carried through in March 1951, and in the autumn of that year Avery was forced to leave Iran after all British personnel of the AIOC were expelled by the nationalist Prime Minister, Moḥammad Moṣaddeq. For the next four years he was mainly engaged in teaching English in Baghdad, first at the Iraqi Royal Military College and Staff College (1951-52) and then at the Baghdad College of Arts and Sciences (1952-55). In 1955, two years after the military coup which overthrew Moṣaddeq and restored the Shah (see [COUP D'ETAT OF 1332 Š./1953](#)), Avery returned to Iran, this time as assistant to the general manager of Mowlem, a British engineering company which had won a contract to supervise the repair and reconstruction of some of the country's main highways. Avery's job was not an easy one as differences soon emerged



over the contract between Mowlem and the Iranian government, leading to its premature termination. So when in 1957, at a reception at the British Embassy in Tehran, Avery met the Oxford historian, Hugh Trevor-Roper, who urged him to pursue an academic career, he enthusiastically took up the suggestion and the following year applied successfully for the post of lecturer in Persian at Cambridge University. He was made a Fellow of King's College in 1964 and a few years later took up residence in a fine set of rooms in the college where he remained for the rest of his life, teaching and entertaining with equal gusto.

At Cambridge Avery came to know an earlier generation of erudite scholars, from whom he undoubtedly learnt much. There was Professor [Vladimir Minorsky](#), the great Russian scholar of Persian history and culture, then living in retirement; Laurence Lockhart, the historian of the Safavids and [Nāder Shah](#), who, like Avery, had worked in Iran for the AIOC, and [A. J. Arberry](#), the Professor of Arabic. On Arberry's death in 1969, Avery succeeded him as Director of the Middle East Centre in the Oriental Faculty.

The most important part of Avery's published works consists of translations of Persian poetry, in particular the ghazals (*ghazal*) of Hafez, the Persian poet for whom he felt a special empathy. He began translating some of the ghazals while still a student at SOAS. He then met the English poet, John Heath-Stubbs (1918-2006), who was curious to learn about Hafez's poetry, and the two teamed up together. Their collaboration resulted in a slim volume entitled *Hafiz of Shiraz: Thirty Poems* (London, 1952). In their introduction they provide a perceptive analysis of one of the ghazals in order to show that the couplets are not, as Sir William Jones (1746-94) described them, "orient pearls at random strung," but are linked to one another through the subtle play of images and what they call "suppressed associations." Avery always insisted that Hafez used a very colloquial language and he and John Heath-Stubbs attempted with some success to capture this in their translations. They followed the form of the original only to the extent that they retained the division of the ghazal into couplets, on the grounds that this was "the essential unit of the poem's structure." But whereas Hafez uses rhyme and very precise meters, Avery and Heath-Stubbs opted in their translations for unrhymed verse "based on a loose line of, generally, six stresses, which can be expanded and contracted as its content demand" (Introduction, p. 15).

Another collaboration with John Heath-Stubbs followed many years later, when they translated *The Ruba'iyat of Omar Khayyam* (London, 1979). The Persian texts they used were two selections of the *Rubaiyat* (*robā'iyāt*), judged



to be genuinely by Khayyam—one by the writer, [Sadeq Hedayat](#), and the other by [Moḥammad-‘Ali Foruḡi](#) and [Qāsem Ġani](#). Any verse translation of Omar Khayyam inevitably faces comparison with the famous version by the Victorian poet, [Edward FitzGerald](#), which has become one of the most popular poems in the English language. Avery and Heath-Stubbs avoided this by abandoning even the very loose verse form of their earlier translations of Hafez. They opted instead for a literal prose translation, on the grounds that this best conveyed the content and the ‘baldness’ of the original quatrains. But more generally they argued—and this came to be Avery’s firmly held view—that an English verse translation of a Persian poem was likely to “widen the distance between the English reader and the content and spirit of the original Persian text by interposing an extraneous poetical mode”(Introduction, p. 32). Their translation provides a useful adjunct and corrective to FitzGerald, who, they rightly say, smothered the baldness of the originals with “a Victorian richness and lushness of sentiment.”

Having rejected verse translations, Avery no longer had any need to collaborate with an English poet. He now worked on his own and his retirement in 1990 gave him the time to undertake two major works of translation. The first was *The Speech of the Birds* (Cambridge, 1998), a translation of the long mystical poem *Manteq al-ṭayr*, written by Farid-al-Din ‘Aṭṭār. This involved translating nearly 5,000 couplets from the Persian text edited by [Sayyed Ṣādeq Gowharin](#) (Tehran, 1962). Avery dedicated his translation to Gowharin, whom he had come to know when he was in Iran and who gave him that thorough grounding in Sufism which is so necessary for understanding much of Persian poetry. As a prose translation, it is a faithful rendering of the original text and is accompanied by copious endnotes, which elucidate the many references likely to be unfamiliar to most readers.

In his final years, Avery returned to Hafez with a translation of all 486 ghazals in Parviz Kānlari’s authoritative edition of the poet’s work (*Divān-e Hāfez*, Tehran, 1983). *The Collected Lyrics of Hafiz* (London, 2007) appeared a year before Avery’s death, and represented, he said, “the thoughts and efforts of many years.” Through the prose translations he now favored, he sought to convey, more effectively than he had done with John Heath-Stubbs, what he described as “the hard directness and colloquialism” characteristic of the ghazals. As with Khayyam and ‘Aṭṭār, the translations have the considerable merit of close adherence to the original, aided once again by helpful explanatory notes.



Avery also wrote on Iranian history from the reign of Nāder Shah to the late 20th century. His *Modern Iran* (London, 1965) was one of the first attempts to tackle in depth the complex history of Iran in the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries. Although it has since been superseded by more recent works, it remains interesting for the author's impressions of Iran, the Iranian character and Iranian society, and his reflections on events during his time in the region. A more lasting achievement was his editorship, in conjunction with Gavin Hambly and Charles Melville, of the final volume, Volume VII, of *The Cambridge History of Iran; From Nadir Shah to the Islamic Republic* (Cambridge, 1991), to which he contributed two important chapters, one on "Nadir Shah and the Afsharid Legacy" and the other on "Printing, the Press and Literature in Modern Iran." Altogether less successful was his political and literary history of Iran, which was published at the end of his life (*The Spirit of Iran: A History of Achievement from Adversity*, Costa Mesa, 2007). No doubt owing in part to his declining health, Avery seems to have tired of the work, as it virtually ends in the 18th century, with only 43 out of 656 pages of text devoted to the following two centuries. He also wrote a number of articles on Iranian history, among the most valuable being an examination of the causes behind the outbreak of the second Russo-Persian War in 1826 and a study of the impact on Iran, with its silver currency, of the collapse after 1871 of the world value of silver. Avery's achievements were recognized in Britain in 2001 when he was appointed OBE (Order of the British Empire) for the 'promotion of oriental studies' and in Iran where, in 2007, the Islamic Republic awarded him an International Farabi prize for 'devotion to the study of the humanities.'

Avery also contributed several articles to the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, including 'Abbāsi (with B. G. Fragner and J. B. Simmons); Donaldson, Bess Allen; Gowharin, Sayyed Şādeq; and entries on both Gore Ouseley and William Ouseley (with *Elr.*).

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