



BYRON, ROBERT

BYRON, ROBERT (b. London, 26 February 1905; d. off Stornoway, 24 February 1941), travel writer and amateur historian of architecture. He was educated at Eton and Merton College, Oxford. Among his books are: *The Station. Athos, treasures and men* (1928); *The Byzantine Achievement, an historical perspective, A.D. 330-1453* (1929); and *First Russia, Then Tibet* (1933). But he is best known for his classic travel narrative, *The Road to Oxiana* (1937). This book, in the form of a diary, was based on an extended trip that he made in 1933-34 in the company of Christopher Sykes and others. His itinerary took him through Palestine, Syria, and Iraq and thereafter he visited Kermānšāh, Tehran, Tabriz, Nišāpur, Mashad, Herat, Qom, Isfahan, Shiraz, Firuzābād, Persepolis, Sulṭāniya, Gonbād-e Qābus, Māzār-e Šarif, Kabul, among others.

Though *The Road to Oxiana* was written in the form of a diary, it was certainly not a straightforward record of a journey. Byron's notes were artfully reworked over three years. Moreover, certain sections of it must be read as fiction. He spoke no Persian or Pashto and yet he managed to provide some very funny dialogues with the locals he encountered. The finished work was in the picaresque, comic tradition of Alexander Kinglake's *Eothen* and James Morier's *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan*. An account of the archaeologist Ernst Herzfeld, and the latter's unavailing attempts to stop Byron from taking photographs of Persepolis, is one of several comic set pieces. Byron particularly detested Reza Shah but, ever cautious of eavesdroppers and spies, when they talked about him in a derogatory fashion he and Sykes referred to him as 'Marjoribanks'. Byron was also scathing about



the hideousness of Tehran and its political intrigues.

Byron's journey was intended primarily as a quest for the Central Asian roots of Islamic art, and the distinguished architectural historian [Arthur Upham Pope](#) had provided him with all sorts of information and assistance prior to his departure (and Byron would, in turn, furnish Pope with photographs for his *Survey of Persian Art*). Byron was an aesthete who described what he saw in a precise and evocative prose. Ernst Diez's *Islamische Baukunst in Churasan* served Byron as a distinctly weighty guide to what he should look for. He claimed that the trip had been inspired by a photograph of [Gonbād-e Qābus](#) in one of Diez's books, and indeed one of the great strengths of Byron's book is his extraordinary ability to conjure up architecture in words. He wrote about colored architecture in an age before color photography was common. Seljuk brickwork was one of his enthusiasms. He was slower to be converted to the glories of Timurid and Safavid tile-work, but he became particularly passionate about Timurid architecture and the Turkish and Mongol contributions to traditional Islamic architectural forms. By contrast, he was not very interested in the monuments of the Achaemenians or the Sasanians. Besides evoking the great Islamic monuments of the region in a sinewy, lexically rich prose, he made his own photographic records. This photographic archive is now in the custody of the Conway Library of the Courtauld Institute in London and is of great value, since many of the pictures are of buildings that have since been destroyed or incompetently restored. For example, he took photographs of the tomb of Ġiāt-al-Din (q.v.) in Herat and of a ruined shrine in Māzār-e Šarīf that have since vanished. Byron's trip had been well timed as it was only since 1931 that Iranian mosques had been opened to foreigners, a move which led to a reappraisal of Persian architecture by Western scholars.

Byron and his companions, taking photographs and making copious notes, were often suspected of being spies. It is possible that these suspicions were correct, as this was a time when the British government was anxious about Reza Shah's Anglophobia and the future of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, as well as about Nazi penetration of Iran. It seems fairly clear that Sykes was a spy, and Byron had many contacts with the political establishment in London.

Byron, who was continually hard up, traveled and wrote for money. In the wake of his travels in Persia and Afghanistan, he wrote several articles about them for *The Times* and *Country Life*. However, the book of his travels, though widely praised by critics and winner of a medal as the outstanding travel book



of the year, did not at first sell particularly well. Nevertheless, it has regularly been reprinted and is an enduring literary classic. Byron drowned at sea in 1826 in the early stages of the Second World War when his ship was torpedoed while he was on his way to Cairo as a special war correspondent.

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