



CAMPBELL, JOHN

i. The life

CAMPBELL, JOHN (1799-1870), British envoy to Persia, 1830-35. While a captain in the 2nd Madras Light Cavalry, Campbell joined the Persian mission of John Kinneir MacDonal as second secretary in 1826. During the second Russo-Persian war (1826-28) he functioned as liaison officer between MacDonal and the crown prince ‘Abbās Mīrzā (1203-49/1789-1833), who led the Iranian army, and helped to arrange peace negotiations with Russia (India Office Library, extracts from Campbell’s diary, included in “MacDonal to Secret Committee, Tabreez, October 1827”; and Campbell’s report on his negotiations at the Russian camp of ‘Abbāsābād, included in “MacDonal to Swinton, Tassooch 1 November 1827,” L/P and S 41).

Although contemporary sources describe him as vain, bad-tempered, and mean (McNeill, pp. 168-69; Yapp, p. 108; Wright, p. 19), Campbell was chosen to serve as chargé d’affaires after MacDonal’s death in June, 1830, mainly owing to the influence of his father, Sir Robert Campbell, who himself became chairman of the court of directors of the East India Company in 1831. He vacillated in his policies. First, he opposed the prevailing British view that Russia was an imminent threat to India. He even allowed the British military unit attached to the Iranian army to participate in ‘Abbās Mīrzā’s expedition to subdue Khorasan in 1247/1831. In less than a year’s time he altered his position, however, and in his dispatches began to emphasize the threat of Russia’s ascendancy in Iran (Public Record Office, Campbell to Secret



Committee, Tehran 4 September 1832, FO 60:33). He now came to support a policy of consolidating Afghanistan as a buffer state.

John Campbell was knighted in January, 1833, and in 1834 he was named consul general and plenipotentiary by the British government. In this capacity Campbell worked hard to promote the opening of the trade route from Iran to Trebizond (Trabzon) on the Black Sea. He attempted to reach a commercial agreement with Fath-‘Alī Shah (r. 1212-50/1797-1834), but the negotiations foundered on British insistence on appointing consuls.

After Fath-‘Alī Shah’s death on 23 October 1834 Campbell played an effective role in securing the throne for his grandson Moḥammad Mīrzā (r. 1250-64/1834-48). ‘Abbās Mīrzā had died before his father, and a British army detachment that had arrived in Persia in November, 1833, to support his succession was then employed in Azarbaijan training the troops of the new heir apparent; nevertheless at the time of his grandfather’s death Moḥammad Mīrzā was not yet ready to march from Tabrīz against the two rival Qajar claimants in Shiraz and Tehran. On Campbell’s advice military assistance was provided for the advance of Moḥammad Mīrzā’s troops to the capital, counteracting a similar offer by the Russians. On 10 November, less than three days after news of the shah’s death had reached Tabrīz, the troops commanded by British officers set out for Tehran. It was a combination of British military leadership and an advance of 30,000 pounds sterling from Campbell to pay Moḥammad Mīrzā’s troops that won the throne for him.

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ii. The Archives

Captain Sir John Nicholl Robert Campbell (b. England, 25 May 1799; d. England, 1870), was British envoy to Iran from 1831 to 1835. His father, Sir Robert Campbell first Bart (1771-1858), was a merchant at Madras from 1796



and director in the East India Company (q.v.) from 1817 to 1852. John Nicholl Robert Campbell joined the Madras Army in 1818 and was on the staff of the British Mission to Persia from 1824. Lord William Bentinck appointed him, then Captain John Campbell, as envoy to the Persian court in December 1831, after the demise of Sir John Macdonald (1782-1830), who had been the British Envoy to Persia from 1826. Captain Campbell was replaced in 1835 by Sir Henry Ellis, an ambassador appointed by the Foreign Office, transferring responsibility for Iranian affairs from the HEIC (Honorable East India Company) to London. Campbell clan's services to the East India Company, over a period of 250 years, were recorded and published by Major Duncan Campbell in 1925.

Campbell's tenure in Iran, coincided with an era of increased international political machinations in the Near East, not least, the 'great game' played out by Russia and Great Britain, arguably a crucial moment in laying the foundations for the geo-political boundaries of modern day states in the region. The archives left behind by Campbell provide scholars with a comprehensive first-hand account of British and foreign involvement in Iran and Central Asia in the 1800s.

A series of papers kept at the British library (British Library, D556/1-20) contain documents concerning John Campbell and his father. The early papers (1-10), which are directly related to Sir Robert Campbell, provide a background to British involvement and influence in the region through the East India Company. The next ten (nos. 11-20), related to his son Sir John Robert Campbell, are inundated with information and include letters, decrees, and texts of social, military, and economic contents. There is a book of translated letters and conversations between the Persian royal court and British officials (D556/11). In D556/16 we find insightful letters and notes relating to Britain's interest in having close ties with Persia and preventing Iran from becoming dependent on Russia. A review of the Afghanistan expedition and war notes, dated 1843, can be found in D556/18. There are also three reels of microfilms (British Library, IOR Neg 8605-7) of Sir Hereford Jones's papers dated from 1799 to 1840. These were auctioned at Sotheby's in 1961 and were purchased for £80 by Duke University (Durham, N.C.). Before an export license was granted, the British Museum, on behalf of the India Office library, demanded that microfilms be made of the folios.

Besides the archives at the British library and Duke University, there is also Campbell's own personal archive, dating from 1830-42, which contains letters,



dispatches, notes, royal decrees (*farmān*, q.v.), diaries, and copies of treaties, including Torkamānčāy, Turco-Russian, and the Anglo-Persian treaty of commerce (of 1841; text: Hurewitz, ed., p. 280). The archive is contained in six boxes and was compiled by Major Sir Duncan Campbell of Barcaldine, with a foreword and index by Lieutenant Colonel Sir Richard C. Temple (1925, Longmans Green and Co, London). The collection was purchased in 2012 by an Azarbaijani philanthropist and codified in the same year by Roya Arab for a digital archive.

Campbell's private archive is striking for the differing perspectives of domestic and private lives in Persia that it provides, including gifts presented to the Persian court, high living costs, women's lives in Persia, comparisons of routes, deterioration of wine during transport, problems with the mail, letters to and from Persian and British kings, as well as personal thoughts on political affairs in family letters and diaries. Campbell's central role in the Persian court is reflected in his accounts of critical meetings with leading statesmen where his support had been sought. His preferential treatment at the court enabled him to provide detailed descriptions of court customs and protocol within the royal circle, exemplified in his report of MoḥammadShah's coronation.

The papers also provide conclusive background information on Campbell's intervention in the succession struggle at the Persian court, which led to Moḥammad Shah gaining the crown after Faṭḥ-'Ali Shah (r. 1797-1834). The fine details of this intercession related in the archive provide invaluable information for the historians of the period. For instance (Temple, 1925): "A detachment of British officers and men were in Persia from the mid-1820s, until withdrawal at the time of the Herat incident [see [HERAT vi. THE HERAT QUESTION](#)] and this detachment played a crucial part in Persian affairs. ... A number of men who were subsequently to become well-known in British Indian affairs served in the detachment during Campbell's tenure, including D'Arcy Todd, Justin Sheil, and Henry Rawlinson (who, as a young Lieutenant in the detachment conducted his first decipherment of the cuneiform inscription in Behistun) [see [RAWLINSON, HENRY ii. CONTRIBUTIONS TO ASSYRIOLOGY AND IRANIAN STUDIES](#)]."

In an interesting letter (November 1834) to the East India secret committee, Campbell requests £20,000, deeming it "indispensably requisite to forward the object of our government at a juncture when the safety and independence of the Persian crown and kingdom are in imminent hazard"(Campbell Private Archive, 0339.1834h.LC.JNRC-EICSC.3-4).The fund enabled him to support



Moḥammad Mirzā with the British detachment that had arrived in 1833, originally to support ‘Abbās Mirzā’s succession. It eventually led to the defeat of other claimants to the throne and the driving of the sons of the main rival into exile (Temple).

The letters and dispatches in the archive illustrate the competition between Campbell and the Russian ambassador, Count Simonitch, for influence over the Persian court. In letters to his father, as HEIC chairman, he outlines his suspicions of Russian spies in the Persian army and the inevitability of Russian power in the region. Robert Temple contends that a more diplomatic envoy would have made better use of the opportunities opened up from the influence that Campbell once exerted in the Persian court, and that his highly confrontational relationship with the Persian foreign minister, Mirzā Abu’l-Ḥasan Khan Ilči, led to missing an opportunity for increasing British influence in Iran. The archive includes extensive documentation of charges brought against Campbell by Mirzā Abu’l-Ḥasan and Campbell’s responses and defense. The documents related to this matter show how this confrontation brought about Campbell’s downfall and had a lasting negative impact on Anglo-Persian relations (Temple, p. three).

The Torkamānčāy Treaty (1828; text: Hurewitz, ed., I, pp. 231-41) in the Campbell private archive is one of two surviving copies; the other one is in the Kremlin, and Iran misplaced its own in the 1950s (Temple). Campbell acted as go-between at the negotiations of the treaty, which resulted in Persia ceding part of her northwestern territory to Russia, which diminished her role as a regional power. In the treaty Persia renounced her claim on the territories of Azarbaijan and most of present-day Georgia and Armenia and gave full rights of access to Russian consulate envoys all over Persia; Persian ships lost full rights to the Caspian and her coasts to Russia.

As was the case for the Treaty of Golestān (q.v.), Persia was forced to sign the treaty by Russia, as it had no alternative after the defeat of Crown Prince ‘Abbās Mirzā (q.v.). The Russian general had threatened Fath-‘Ali Shah that he would conquer Tehran in five days unless the treaty was signed (Temple). These events occurred after Campbell’s departure, during the tenure of Sir John MacDonal Kinneir, whose official papers were lost when being shipped to England. A detailed account of Campbell’s involvement in these affairs can be found in the posthumous memoirs of Campbell’s assistant, Sir John McNeill (McNeill, *passim*).



The private archive of Campbell, besides containing rare originals of treaties and official letters, comprises a significant number of unpublished letters and journals. It is these, alongside letters to secret committees and family members, that provide a frank, personal, and not often seen evidence of the true nature and manner of Western politics and diplomacy in action in Iran and Central Asia at a critical point of significant change in the region. This archive, alongside the papers at the British Library, supplies scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth century with a comprehensive first-hand record concerning diplomacy, international politics and economy, the Qajars (royal court, officials and political intrigue), and Russian and British political, military and economic relations with Iran.

See also [GREAT BRITAIN ii. An Overview of Relations: Safavid to the Present](#).

Roya Arab

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The private archive of Sir John Nicholl Robert Campbell was digitally catalogued in 2012 by Roya Arab (Institute of Archaeology, University College London [UCL]) and has recently been placed with a charitable educational foundation; details of the location will be provided when the foundation launches the archive.

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