



## CURZON, GEORGE NATHANIEL

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**CURZON, GEORGE NATHANIEL**, 1st Marquess of Kedleston (b. Kedleston, Derbyshire, England, 11 January 1859, d. London, 30 March 1925), statesman, traveler, and writer. The eldest son of the fourth Baron Scarsdale of Kedleston, Derbyshire, where the family owned land and had been settled since the 12th century, Curzon, like others of the British upper class and aristocracy, was educated at Eton and Balliol College, Oxford; at both places he achieved academic distinction. At Balliol Abu'l-Qāsem Khan (later Nāṣer-al-Molk), who subsequently became regent for the last Qajar shah, was among his friends and contemporaries. From 1886-98 Curzon sat in the House of Commons as Conservative member for Southport, serving as parliamentary under-secretary for India (1891-92) and for foreign affairs (1895-98) in Lord Robert Salisbury's second and third governments respectively. During those early years Curzon traveled widely: in 1882-85 in Europe and the Near East; in 1887-88 to Canada, the United States, Japan, China, Ceylon, and India; in 1888 to Russia and, by way of the newly built Trans-Caspian railway, from its terminus on the Caspian Sea to Bukhara and Samarkand; in 1889-90 to Persia; in 1892-93 to the United States, Japan, Korea, China, and Siam (Thailand); and in 1894-95 to India, Afghanistan, and the Pamirs. Those five long, arduous journeys did much to color his thinking and provide material for a succession of books (for his works other than *Persia and the Persian Question*, see bibliography below).

In April 1895 Curzon married Mary Victoria Leiter, daughter of a Chicago millionaire, to whom he had become secretly engaged two years earlier. It



proved a singularly happy marriage, and his wife's death in 1906 deeply affected him. There were three daughters of the marriage but, to Curzon's regret, no son. In 1917 Grace Duggan, widow of an American diplomat, became his second wife.

An early ambition was achieved in 1898, when Curzon was appointed viceroy and governor-general of India. The four-year appointment was extended to allow him to complete his reform program, but a quarrel with Herbert Lord Kitchener, commander-in-chief of British forces in India, over control of those forces, in which the British government backed Kitchener, led Curzon to resign. Subsequently, though he held a seat in the House of Lords from 1908, Curzon found himself in the political wilderness until he became a member of Lord Herbert Asquith's and David Lloyd George's wartime coalition governments, in May 1915 and December 1916 respectively. Under Lloyd George he became leader of the House of Lords and a member of the war cabinet. When Arthur James Balfour, the foreign secretary, accompanied Lloyd George to the Paris peace conference in January 1919 Curzon was appointed acting foreign secretary; upon Balfour's resignation in October he became foreign secretary, thus achieving the second of his early ambitions. After the fall of Lloyd George's government Curzon remained as foreign secretary in the succeeding Conservative governments of Bonar Law (1922-23) and Stanley Baldwin (1923-24), though bitterly disappointed that the latter and not he had been asked by the king to form a government after Law's resignation.

Curzon's interest in Britain's eastern colonies and dominions had first been aroused while he was a schoolboy at Eton. It was an interest that never left him and was reflected in his lifelong concern for Persia as an outer bastion in the defense of India. His travels had instilled in him a profound belief in the civilizing virtues of the British empire in the East. He regarded British India as "the noblest fabric yet reared by the genius of a conquering nation" (Curzon, *Persian Question* I, dedication) and believed that "without India the British empire could not exist" (I, p. 4). The defense of India thus came to dominate much of his thinking in the years ahead. For him Persia and the waters of the Persian Gulf, no less than Afghanistan and Tibet, were borderlands that had to be protected from the expansionist policies of czarist Russia.

Curzon's railway journey to Samarkand in 1888 convinced him that the Trans-Caspian railway gave Russia "the practical control of Khorasan" (1889, p. 287); at the same time he deplored the weakening of Britain's position in Persia. In



the following year he visited the country to see things for himself. Again traveling on the Trans-Caspian railway as far as [Ashkhabad](#), he began his Persian journey in Khorasan. Disappointed at being refused permission to enter the great natural fortress of Kalāt-e Nāderī, he made his way to Qūčān and Mašhad; riding horseback, despite the discomfort of the steel brace a back ailment forced him to wear throughout his adult life, he followed the well-traveled pilgrim route through Šāhrūd and Semnān to Tehran. He then continued via Isfahan and Shiraz to Būšeher, whence he sailed to Moḥammara (Korramšahr) and, after an exploratory expedition up the Kārūn river as far as Ahvāz, left Persia for Baghdad and London.

Contrary to what has often been written, Curzon spent little more than a total of three months in Persia, entering the country in late September 1889 and leaving it before the end of January the following year. On his return to London he took lodgings in a London suburb and concentrated on writing his magnum opus, *Persia and the Persian Question*, which was, by dint of hard, concentrated work, ready for publication less than two years later. By any standard these two volumes, totaling some 1,300 pages, are a remarkable achievement, the more so as Curzon knew no Persian and spent only a short time in the country, of which he saw only a small section. To prepare himself, he first read, either in the original or in translation, virtually everything that had been written about Persia in the West. On the journey itself, while writing articles for *The Times*, he had assiduously collected information, with considerable help from Albert Houtum Schindler, a naturalized British subject, German by birth, who had first gone to Persia as an employee of the Indo-European Telegraph Company and was at the time of Curzon's visit adviser to the newly established Imperial Bank of Persia and recognized as the best-informed European in the country. He not only provided Curzon with a wealth of detailed information but also, as Curzon freely acknowledged, "personally revised nearly every page" of the manuscript (*Persian Question* I, p. xiii). The two profusely illustrated volumes embrace almost the whole of Persia, describing in fascinating and profound detail its history, antiquities, institutions, administration, finances, natural resources, commerce, and topography with a thoroughness no single writer has achieved before or since. As a critical account of Qajar Persia, the work is unsurpassed.

Curzon never set foot in Persia again, but the impressions formed during his journey and recorded in his book never left him and were reflected in his policies as viceroy and foreign secretary. He believed that Russia had designs



on Persia's northern provinces and the Persian Gulf and that the acquisition of Mašhad and Sīstān would open the doors to Herat and Baluchistan on the threshold of India. With the defense of India in mind, he considered that "the preservation, so far as it is still possible, of the integrity of Persia must be registered as a cardinal precept of our Imperial creed" (*Persian Question II*, p. 605). To this end the British position in Persia had to be strengthened and every effort made to impress on "the native mind the prestige of a great and wealthy Power" (*Persian Question II*, p. 172). Although Curzon was dazzled by the glorious past of Persia, he was struck by the country's decay and squalor. He also formed a low opinion of the Persian character: Persians might be "an amiable and polished race and have the manners of gentlemen . . . vivacious in temperament, intelligent in conversation, and acute in conduct," yet they were "consummate hypocrites, very corrupt, and lamentably deficient in stability or courage" (*Persian Question II*, p. 632). They had therefore to be saved from themselves and from the Russians. It was a task for the British, for Persia was "a country that should excite the liveliest sympathies of Englishmen; with whose Government our own government should be upon terms of intimate alliance; and in the shaping for which of a future that shall be not unworthy of its splendid past the British nation have it in their power to take a highly honourable lead" (*Persian Question II*, p. 634). Here, in the final sentence of his book, lay the germ of Curzon's ill-fated [Anglo-Persian Agreement of 1919](#).

The protection of British imperial interests in Persia and the bordering waters of the Persian Gulf received Curzon's close personal attention throughout his years as viceroy. Already before sailing for India in December 1898 he had recommended establishing a British protectorate over Kuwait, in order to forestall possible moves in that direction by the Russians and others. Shortly after his arrival in Calcutta he put pressure on the sultan of Muscat to cancel a coaling concession granted to the French the previous year. In September 1899 he addressed to the India Office a lengthy dispatch (printed in full in Hurewitz, 1956), which has been described as "perhaps the most profound and comprehensive official analysis in historical context of Britain's problems in Persia at the century's end" (Hurewitz, 1956, I, p. 219). British interests—commercial, political, strategic, and telegraphic—had, Curzon argued, to be protected from threatened foreign challenges, particularly Russian; he saw the Russians as encroaching southward from Khorasan toward Sīstān and the waters of the Persian Gulf. Although Curzon thought Britain should try to reach an agreement with Russia over their respective spheres of influence in Persia, he had little confidence in Russian good faith and wanted Britain to



take independent steps to strengthen its position. To this end, he supported the recommendations of Sir [Mortimer Durand](#), the British minister in Tehran, for the increase of consular and other establishments and was willing that the government of India (which already bore a major part of the cost of the British official establishment in Persia) should share the cost. He also wanted more frequent naval visits to the Persian Gulf.

Two years later Curzon was again pressing for a protectorate over Kuwait and the strengthening of the British position in [Bahrain](#). He also called on the British government to resist Russian attempts to secure a port on the Persian Gulf. He would, he had already written, “impeach the British minister who was guilty of acquiescing in such a surrender as a traitor to his country” (*Persian Question II*, p. 465).

In January 1902 an announcement in the House of Commons that the British government would not submit to the disturbance of the status quo in Kuwait owed much to Curzon’s advocacy, as did the declaration of Foreign Secretary Lord Henry Lansdowne in the following year that the British government would “regard the establishment of a naval base, or a fortified port, in the Persian Gulf by any other power as a very grave menace to British interests, and we should certainly resist it with all the means at our disposal” (Hurewitz, 1975, p. 507).

Later the same year Curzon, escorted by an impressive naval flotilla, embarked on a spectacular tour of the Persian Gulf designed to demonstrate the commanding position that Britain enjoyed there. But he angrily abandoned a planned visit to [Būšehr](#), headquarters of the British political resident for the Persian Gulf, “the Uncrowned King of the Persian Gulf” (*Persian Question II*, p. 451), when the shah’s representative there insisted that the viceroy must pay the first courtesy call.

Curzon followed closely the struggle between Britain and Russia for influence in Tehran. He thought his old Oxford friend the British minister Sir Arthur Hardinge was too suppliant in a country where “a good show of the boot now and then is very essential” (quoted in Rose, p. 350) but helped him by agreeing that the government of India would lend up to 500,000 pounds sterling to the Imperial Bank of Persia (for a seat on the board of which he had lobbied unsuccessfully in 1890) to relend to the Persian government. To counter rumored Russian moves in Sīstān, he encouraged the Imperial Bank to establish a branch there and authorized improvements along the newly



opened trade route from Quetta via Nūškī to Mašhad.

By the time Curzon left India in 1905 Britain's position in the Persian Gulf was stronger than ever before; he also deserves some credit for the strengthening of British standing in Persia.

During his "wilderness years" after leaving India Curzon played no part in the formulation of policy, though, as spokesman for the opposition in the House of Lords, he made a strong attack in February 1908 on the [Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907](#), which he correctly saw as damaging Britain's position in Persia and failing to provide for the independence of Persia or the security of India.

Curzon returned to the political stage in 1915, when he joined Asquith's wartime coalition government. Thereafter, until the fall of Baldwin's Conservative government nine years later, he played an increasingly important role in the direction of British foreign policy. Even before moving into the Foreign Office in January 1919 his chairmanship of the Middle East (cabinet) and Persian (interdepartmental) committees and their successor, the Eastern committee, provided him with a key policy-making position in areas where his expertise was recognized as second to none. Once installed in the Foreign Office he masterminded British eastern policy, though, as long as Lloyd George remained prime minister, he had good cause to complain that his views in other areas were often ignored.

During World War I and the immediately following years extensive British military and financial commitments in Persia were a matter of great concern to the governments in which Curzon was an influential member. His hand can be seen in the decision, taken early in 1918, to work for the appointment of the notoriously anglophile Mīrzā Ḥasan Khan Woṭūq-al-Dawla as prime minister, as well as in the granting of authority to the British Minister in Tehran, Charles Marling, to pay the shah a monthly personal subsidy of 15,000 tomans (about 5,000 pounds sterling in the money of the day) once he had made the appointment. Woṭūq-al-Dawla was duly appointed prime minister in August 1918. A month later Marling was replaced by [Sir Percy Cox](#), a member of the Indian political service who had served many years as political resident in the Persian Gulf and had won Curzon's esteem as a young man in Muscat, while Curzon was viceroy. Cox's task was to negotiate with Woṭūq-al-Dawla an Anglo-Persian alliance that would secure "the permanent maintenance of British influence in a country bordering on the Indian Empire" (India Office



Library and Records [I.O.], L/P & S/10/735).

Cox's negotiations were conducted secretly with Woṭūq-al-Dawla and two equally anglophile ministers, Firūz Mīrzā Noṣrat-al-Dawla and Akbar Mīrzā Ṣārem-al-Dawla, both Qajar princes, a trio known to the British as "the triumvirate." Curzon himself directed the negotiations from London. For fear of jeopardizing them, he opposed Aḥmad Shah's wish to visit Europe and urged Lloyd George and Balfour not to receive the Persian mission that sought a hearing at the Paris peace conference. Negotiations, all but completed by April 1919, were prolonged by an unwelcome demand from the triumvirate for an advance payment of 500,000 tomans, allegedly to enable them to buy off opponents of the agreement. Curzon was willing to pay them 20,000 pounds sterling from Secret Service funds; when they refused this offer, he reluctantly authorized Cox, despite his "intense dislike of this phase of the transaction" (Public Record Office [P.R.O.], F.O. 371/3682) to make the best deal he could with them but insisted that any payment must be treated as an advance on the 2 million pounds sterling loan provided for in the agreement and not as a grant. In the event, the Triumvirate settled for 400,000 tomans (131,147 pounds sterling in the money of the day), which was paid through the Imperial Bank a few days after the signing of the agreement on 9 August 1919 (*Documents on British Foreign Policy [D.B.F.P.] XIII*, p. 639).

Curzon regarded the agreement as "a great triumph as I have done it all alone. But not a single paper as much as mentions my name, or has the dimmest perception that, had I not been at the FO, it would never have been done at all" (quoted in Mosley, p. 202). The agreement gave Britain a free hand, to the virtual exclusion of others, in what Curzon sincerely hoped would be the regeneration of Persia under British tutelage. The British government undertook to lend such expert advisers as were required, to supply munitions and equipment for a national army to be trained by British officers, to help revise the customs tariff, and to cooperate in railway construction and other communications improvements; in addition, a loan of 2 million pounds sterling at 7 percent was to finance necessary reforms. In a memorandum circulated to his cabinet colleagues on the day the agreement was signed Curzon explained that the magnitude of British interests in Persia, its geographical position between the new British mandate in Iraq and British India, and "the future safety of our Eastern Empire render it impossible for us now—just as it would have been for us at any time during the past 50 years—to disinterest our selves from what happens in Persia . . . . Further if



Persia were to be left alone there is every reason to fear that she would be over-run by Bolshevik influences from the north” . . . or would “become a hotbed of misrule, enemy intrigue, financial chaos and political disorder” (*D.B.F.P.* IV, p. 1121).

In their single-minded pursuit of the agreement with three unpopular members of the Persian ruling class Curzon and Cox ignored warnings from the government of India that “this ultra pro-British triumvirate is a very uncertain barometer of public opinion” (P.R.O., F.O. 371/3860). Ugly stories that the triumvirate had been bribed began to circulate (see [conspiracy theories](#)) and added fuel to growing nationalist and popular opposition to an agreement that was seen as turning Persia into a vassal state. It was left to Herman Norman, who replaced Cox in Tehran in June 1920, to give Curzon the news, which the latter had no inclination to believe, that *Wotūq-al-Dawla*’s government was “intensely unpopular and their unpopularity is to a great extent shared by Great Britain without whose continued support they would it is realised have fallen long ago” and that the agreement had “never really been popular because it was concluded secretly by a statesman even then deeply distrusted, who persistently postponed submitting it to Parliament” (*D.B.F.P.* XIII, pp. 523, 545).

Norman spent the rest of the year under intense pressure from Curzon in a hopeless attempt to persuade *Wotūq-al-Dawla* and his two successors as prime minister, *Mīrzā Ḥasan Khan Mošīr-al-Dawla Pīrnīā* and *Sepahdār-e A‘zam Faṭḥ-Allāh Akbar* (in whose appointment Norman had played a part), to take the agreement to the *Majles* for ratification, as an essential preliminary to its being registered with the League of Nations and a means of allaying American and European criticism. To achieve this goal he threatened to cut off subsidies on which the Persian government was dependent and fought hard and, for a time, successfully against those of his cabinet colleagues who were pressing on grounds of economy for withdrawal of all British forces from Persia. Curzon, no less than the Persian government, feared that a withdrawal would lay the country open to the Bolsheviks, who had landed at *Anzalī* in May 1920 (see [communism i](#)).

*Rezā Khan*’s [coup d’état](#) of 3 Esfand 1299 Š./21 February 1921 rang the death knell of the agreement, which was formally denounced by the new government a few weeks later. However, it was already clear that it was a dead letter. Curzon bitterly recognized his failure in a scribbled minute, dated 17 February 1921, on a suggestion forwarded by Norman that a new



agreement be negotiated: “I have no desire,” he wrote, “to negotiate a new agreement . . . I have no intention of retaining any troops in Persia after April. Personally I will never propose another agreement with the Persians. Nor, unless they come on their knees, would I ever consider any application from them and probably not then. In future we will look after our own interests in Persia not theirs” (P.R.O., F.O. 371/6401).

Although both Norman and the British chief manager of the Imperial Bank in Tehran welcomed Reżā Khan’s coup, Curzon turned a deaf ear to appeals for assistance addressed to them by Sayyed Žiā’-al-Dīn Ṭabāṭabā’ī, the new and anglophile prime minister. Curzon even forbade the Imperial Bank to make loans to the new government, causing Reżā Khan to remark that it “might be more aptly entitled Lord Curzon’s Bank of Persia” (Jones, p. 184). Had the British government been, as has often been said, behind Reżā Khan’s coup, Curzon would never have rejected those appeals from Tehran. Such evidence as there is of British involvement shows that General Edmund Ironside, then commanding the British forces in Persia, acted on his own initiative in allowing Reżā Khan and his [Cossack Brigade](#) to march on Tehran (Wright, pp. 181-84).

After this failure Curzon had little time for Persian affairs. He unfairly blamed Norman for what Harold Nicolson (p. 120), who had worked under Curzon in the Foreign Office, called the “most galling, because the most personal, of his many diplomatic defeats.” He replaced Norman with a candidate of his own choosing, Percy Loraine, to whom he revealed his fixation that others’, rather than his own, errors of judgment were responsible for the failure of his Persian policy. Apart from Norman his scapegoats included Prime Minister Lloyd George and other cabinet colleagues, whom he accused of being “utterly indifferent to Persia” in their insistence on the withdrawal of British troops from the Caucasus and Persia; Bolshevik propaganda; the hostility of the Majles; and “the incomparable, incurable and inconceivable rottenness of Persian politicians; the desperate and colossal incapacity of the shah” (quoted in Waterfield, pp. 62-63).

In Curzon’s eyes the agreement was a sincere attempt “to give Persia the expert assistance and the financial aid which will enable her to carve out her own fortunes as an independent and still living country” (P.R.O., FA 371/3864). He rejected accusations that he was creating another British protectorate. Despite his great intelligence and experience he could not see the inconsistency between the promise in the preamble to the agreement “to



respect absolutely the independence and integrity of Persia” (Hurewitz, 1956, II, p. 65), which he had himself helped to draft, and the special position accorded to Britain in the agreement. He had, perhaps, forgotten that he had once written that “the normal Asiatic would sooner be misgoverned by Asiatics than well governed by Europeans” (*Persian Question* II, p. 630).

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