



ELWELL-SUTTON, LAURENCE PAUL

ELWELL-SUTTON, LAURENCE PAUL (b. Ballylickey, Cork County, Ireland, 2 June 1912-d. Edinburgh, 2 September 1984), scholar of Islamic and modern Persia ([Figure 1](#)). Son of a naval officer, Lt.-Comdr. A. S. Elwell-Sutton, he was a scholar at Winchester College and then studied Arabic at the School of Oriental Studies, University of London, graduating in 1934.

His first job was with the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (A.P.O.C.; q.v.) at Ābādān (q.v.), where he served on the staff of labor administration (1935-38). During World War II, he lectured at the University of London (1939-40) and was attached to the Ministry of Information. He then worked at the BBC as a specialist in Persian and Arabic. In 1943-47 he was press attaché, Broadcasting, at the British mission in Tehran. During this period, he acquired his interest in the lively Persian press of the post-Rezā Shah years. After several more years at the BBC, he became a lecturer in Persian at Edinburgh University in 1952 and remained there until his retirement in 1982. He became professor of Persian in 1976. Among his early interests were the Social Credit movement, and in later years, Scottish nationalism.

Elwell-Sutton's interests and publications in Persian studies fall into five categories: Persian language; Persian literature; modern Persian history and politics; Persian folklore; and Islamic science. In the first of these, his *Colloquial Persian* (London, 1941) and *Elementary Persian Grammar*



(Cambridge, 1963) have remained in print as standard works. In the second category fall his English translations of a Persian life of the Prophet Moḥammad, *Payāmbār* (Tehran, several reprs., tr. as *The Messenger*, Lahore, 1964-65), by Zayn-al-Ābedīn Rahnemā and ‘Alī Daštī’s *Dam-ī bā Kayyām* (Tehran, 1344 Š./1965, tr. as *In Search of Omar Khayyam*, London, 1971). Prosody and metrics were a special interest of his, marked by a chapter on the *robā’ī* in *Camb. Hist. Iran* IV (pp. 633-57), and above all, by *The Persian Metres* (Cambridge, 1976), his most technical and closely-argued work. In this, he reacted—perhaps too strongly—against the notion that the meters of the New Persian are wholly derived from the quantitative Arabic ones and based his own analysis on the Persian meters summarized in his article “Arūž” (*EIr.* II, pp. 670-79) as they actually occur in New Persian literature. So far, few scholars would quarrel with this assessment, but Elwell-Sutton went further, asserting that the quantitative metres of Persian have nothing to do with the Arabic ones, but continue the patterns of pre-Islamic Middle Persian poetry; yet it seems probable that the latter was essentially a minstrel poetry based on syllables and stress, with no noticeably quantitative elements (see F. de Blois, in Storey, V/1, p. 49, for a critique of this view). *The Persian Metres* nevertheless remains a model of meticulous analysis.

His concern with modern Persia and its politics arose from his years of residence in Persia at a time when the country was undergoing marked political and social change. His *Persian Oil: A Study in Power Politics* (London, 1955) stirred up controversy at the time because of its critical attitude toward his former employer, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (q.v.), and was translated into Russian and Chinese. Later in life, however, Elwell-Sutton became critical of the trend of events in Persia, particularly after the 1978-1979 Revolution, and before he fell ill he was about to embark on a biography of Reżā Shah, whom he regarded as the pioneer figure in bringing Persia into the modern world. He was also interested in the Persian press, publishing a catalog of Persian periodicals 1941-47 (*Iran* 6, 1968, pp. 65-104) and many articles on Persian newspapers in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

His interest in folklore was longstanding. He used his stay in Persia and took subsequent visits to collect material from this folk heritage, then in danger of disappearing under the accelerating pace of change; his *The Wonderful Seahorse and Other Tales* (London, 1950) and *Persian Proverbs* (London, 1954) illustrate this enthusiasm. His study of Islamic science is seen in *The Horoscope of Asadullah Mirza: A Specimen of Nineteenth-Century Persian*



Astrology (Leiden, 1977). At the time of his death he had nearly completed an edition of Bīrūnī's treatise on the astrolabe (See AŞTORLĀB), the *Ketāb fī estī'āb al-wojūh al-momkena fī ŷenā'at al-aştorlāb*, based on six manuscripts. He compiled *A Guide to Iranian Area Study* (Washington, 1952) and edited the invaluable *Bibliographical Guide to Iran* (Brighton and Totowa, 1983).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

C. E. Bosworth and C. Hillenbrand, eds., *Qajar Iran, Political, Social and Cultural Change 1800-1925: Studies Presented to Professor L.P. Elwell-Sutton*, Edinburgh, 1984, repr. Costa Mesa, 1992, contains a preface and a foreword on his life and work and a bibliography of 134 of his works (pp. vii-ix, xiii-xxv).

See also the obituary in *Iran* 23, 1985, pp. iii-iv.