



## HERON-ALLEN, EDWARD

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**HERON-ALLEN, EDWARD**, F.R.S. (b. London, December 17, 1861; d. Large Acres, Selsey, England, March 28, 1943; [FIGURE 1](#)), British polymath, scientist, and Persian scholar who translated the quatrains of Omar Khayyam (ʿOmar Kayyām) and [Bābā Ṭāher](#), defended the controversial translations (see [ENGLISH iii](#)) of [Edward FitzGerald](#) (1809-83) and Frederic Baron Corvo (1860-1913), and assembled, cataloged, and preserved an Omar Khayyam collection, now housed at the London Library.

He was born Edward Heron Allen (the hyphenated surname was his own creation), the youngest of four children, to George Allen and Catherine Herring. He spent most of his childhood in the London suburb of Putney, and was educated at Elstree and Harrow but did not attend a university. In 1879 he joined the family firm of Allen and Son, solicitors, in Soho, London, and was admitted a Solicitor of the Supreme Court of Judicature in 1884. A man of means, he retired from practicing law on his fiftieth birthday. In 1891 he married Marianna, daughter of the painter Rudolf Lehmann; and when she died in 1902, he married a year later Edith (1872-1943), daughter of William Brown Pepler, M.D. They had two daughters.

Although he did not have a full formal education, Heron-Allen's intellectual curiosity and passion for learning never waned, as illustrated by the long list of hobbies and interests in his entry in *Who's Who*: "Persian literature; Marine Zoology; Meteorology; Heraldry; Bibliography; Occasional Essays and Scientific Romances; Auricula and Asparagus Culture" (1943, p. 1430). He published books on these and other subjects, including violin-making,



palmistry, Buddhism, the Egyptian Nefer sign, and the University of Cosmopoli (published under a pseudonym, with the name Cosmopoli echoing the imprint associated with Sir Richard Burton and clandestine literature). Heron-Allen was also an early champion of the Boy Scout movement. He joined the staff of the Directorate of Military Intelligence (MI7b) at the War Office in May 1918, where he dealt specifically with aerial propaganda. In 1919, he was made a Fellow of the Royal Society for his work on Foraminifera (microscopic marine organisms).

Heron-Allen's interest in the quatrains of Khayyam began in 1882, when he met the famous bookseller Bernard Quaritch (1819-1899), friend and publisher of Edward FitzGerald, at an auction of valuable violin books. Quaritch, richer than Heron-Allen, bought all the books. However, he befriended him, lent him books, and launched the budding scholar and collector on a course that would forever change his life. A founding member of an exclusive scholarly dining club called "Ye Sette of Odd Volumes," Quaritch invited Heron-Allen to lecture to the club on June 2, 1882 on the ancestry of the violin. In the audience was Captain (later Sir) Richard F. Burton (1821-1890), traveler, Orientalist, and early champion of FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. Burton participated in the discussion, examined the instruments on display, and agreed with Heron-Allen's claim that the true fiddle was of an Oriental, rather than Welsh, derivation. They became firm friends.

Many years after the death of Quaritch, Heron-Allen publicly acknowledged his indebtedness to him. In a lecture in 1927, while presenting his inaugural address in the dual capacity of "His Oddship" (President of the Sette of Odd Volumes) and Brother "Necromancer" (his self-appointed name since his election in 1883), Heron-Allen proclaimed: "What I am . . . in Literature and Bibliography to-day, I owe to Bernard Quaritch." It was Quaritch who set the stage for "my entrance into literary society, and my thenceforward ever-widening circle of acquaintance with persons of eminence, distinction and notoriety" (Heron-Allen, 1929, p. 13).

Heron-Allen was fluent in a number of languages. In 1885 he studied Turkish with Garabet Hagopian, the Armenian envoy in London. In addition to Hagopian, Heron-Allen sought the guidance of Charles Wells, a Turkish lexicographer. Heron-Allen also made friends with Mirza Malkom Khan (Nāẓem-al-Molk), the famous Persian Minister in London (Denis Wright, pp. 152-66), and in 1896 he studied colloquial Persian with Mirza 'Alinaqi of the Persian Legation. In 1897 he began studying with Edward Denison Ross,



(knighted later; 1871-1940), then Professor of Persian at University College, London.

Heron-Allen published three books on Khayyam, making a significant contribution to the knowledge of the poet in the West. The first (1898) contained Heron-Allen's literal translation of the quatrains of Omar Khayyam as inscribed in the Ouseley manuscript in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, and demonstrated the influence of this manuscript on FitzGerald's translation. A second edition, revised and enlarged, appeared within six months. One addition was a concluding essay that had first appeared as a lecture (delivered March 22, 1898) and later as a pamphlet (*Some Sidelights*, 1898b). It is an erudite defense of FitzGerald's translation as "a synthetical result of our poet's entire course of Persian studies" (Heron-Allen, 1898c, p. 320).

For his second book (1899), Heron-Allen collated over five thousand quatrains, concluding: "Of Edward FitzGerald's quatrains, forty-nine are faithful and beautiful paraphrases of single quatrains to be found in the Ouseley or Calcutta MSS., or both. Forty-four are traceable to more than one quatrain. Two are inspired by quatrains found by FitzGerald only in Nicolas' text. Two are quatrains reflecting the whole spirit of the original poem. Two are traceable exclusively to the influence of the *Mantik ut-tair* of Farid-al-Din Aṭṭār. Two quatrains primarily inspired by Omar were influenced by the Odes of Hafiz. And three, which appeared only in the second edition and were afterwards suppressed by Edward FitzGerald himself are not – so far as careful research enables me to judge – attributable to any lines of the original texts. Other authors may have inspired them, but their identification is not useful in this case" (p. xii).

His final study of Omar Khayyam (1908) reprints FitzGerald's second edition, for Heron-Allen "the crown of FitzGerald's labours." Each quatrain is accompanied by a commentary on the text, and Heron-Allen places special emphasis upon the Platonic philosophy that pervades the Omarian atmosphere (p. xxii).

Heron-Allen also published a literal translation of the quatrains (see [DO-BAYTI](#)) of Bābā Ṭāher in 1902. His introductory essay covers such diverse subjects as biography, bibliography, and linguistics. On Bābā Ṭāher's dialect, he states that while many believe that the quatrains are written in the Lori (Luri) dialect, it appears that "they are written in the Rāji (or Rey) dialect" (p. xvi). In 1924 Heron-Allen wrote the introduction to Frederic Baron Corvo's



translation of Omar Khayyam and returned to an old debate: “Was ’Umar a drunken and degraded voluptuary, or was he a pure and sublime philosopher?” (p. vii). He repeats his conclusion: the truth is probably somewhere “between these two points” (see Heron-Allen, 1908, p. xiv; *ibid.*, 1924, p. vii). As for Corvo’s translation from the French of Jean Baptiste Nicolas, Heron-Allen observes that while Nicolas, deeply imbued with the dogma of Sufi mysticism, attempts to whitewash poor Omar by reading mystical interpretations into the most materialistic sentiments (Heron-Allen, 1924, p. vi, and his note to quatrain 221: “O sweet Boy!,” p. xxix), Baron Corvo proceeds too far in the opposite direction, introducing a “predominant note of homosexuality, which is far from justified by the original” (p. v). Despite this preoccupation, Heron-Allen agrees with Nathan Haskell Dole, who wrote the introduction to the American edition of Corvo’s translation (1903): his is a masterly translation, “a remarkable and interesting performance” (Heron-Allen, 1924, p. x).

Throughout his life, Heron-Allen enjoyed working with others. In addition to Denison Ross, he included the Persian scholars [Edward Granville Browne](#) (1862-1926) and [Edward Byles Cowell](#) (1826-1903) among his distinguished circle of acquaintances. Denison Ross proved an early and devoted collaborator. For six months, beginning in 1897, he saw Heron-Allen constantly at his home in St. John’s Wood, sometimes three times a week, giving him Persian lessons and helping him with the revision of his literal translation (Denison Ross, p. 257). Denison Ross called Heron-Allen’s three books on Khayyam “epoch making” in that they placed the research on Khayyam and FitzGerald on an entirely new footing. To quote Denison Ross in a letter to a fellow Omarian: “He discovered the loaf, we pick up the crumb” (unpublished letter, Heron-Allen Collection, London Library).

Heron-Allen’s correspondence with Browne and Cowell opened new vistas for contemplation. With Browne, topics ranged from the quatrains of Bābā Ṭāher to the Platonic philosophy permeating those of Omar Khayyam. The correspondence with Cowell (1896-1898), on the other hand, focused on the Cowell-FitzGerald collaboration.

One letter to Heron-Allen highlights Cowell’s anxieties. Writing from Cambridge on April 3, 1898, Cowell thanks Heron-Allen for dedicating his pamphlet, the substance of a lecture (*Some Sidelights*, 1898b), only to deny him permission to publish the dedication ever again. Cowell concludes: “I yield to no one in my admiration of ’Omar’s poetry as literature, but I cannot join in



the '*Omar Cult*,' and it would be wrong in me to pretend to profess it . . . . I unwittingly incurred a grave responsibility when I introduced his poems to my old friend in 1856. I admire 'Omar as I admire Lucretius, but I cannot take him as a *guide*. In these grave matters I prefer to go to Nazareth, not to Naishapúr" (Heron-Allen, 1908, p. xv).

In spite of Cowell's reservations, Heron-Allen contributed to the "Omar Cult" by lecturing, publishing, and collecting. He was not a member of the Omar Khayyam Club of London, but he did occasionally attend meetings as a guest and collect a range of club documents, from transactions to menus. He took part in the centenary celebration of FitzGerald's birth by serving as patron and publishing an essay on the philosophy of Omar Khayyam (Heron-Allen, 1909, pp. 17-20).

The Heron-Allen Collection of Omar Khayyam, bequeathed by him to the London Library, is a testimony to the popularity and appeal of the poet. As Ambrose George Potter notes in *A Bibliography of Omar Khayyam*, Heron-Allen granted open access to his valuable collection (p. viii). The collection includes many rare items, including FitzGerald's first edition and Cowell's "Persian Abstracts," the notebook Cowell used when he first copied the Bodleian MS. in 1856. Numerous documents record Heron-Allen's keen interest in the illustrators of Omar Khayyam. He corresponded with artists such as Ella Hallward (the illustrator for all of his books published up to 1902), Elihu Vedder, and Gilbert James. Although evidence of his early travels remains elusive, a travel journal (September – October 1902), written in Constantinople during the latter part of the Ottoman Sultan 'Abd-al-ḤOamid II's rule, records his search for Turkish and Persian manuscripts (unpublished journal, Ivor E. Jones Collection). The collection also contains musical programs and popular parodies. Liza Lehmann (1862-1918), Heron-Allen's sister-in-law, composed her wildly successful song-cycle *In a Persian Garden* (1896) and discussed the venture with her husband Herbert Bedford as well as Heron-Allen. Barry Pain (1864-1928), humorist and Heron-Allen's brother-in-law, greatly assisted with the literal translation of the Bodleian MS. (Heron-Allen, 1898c, pp. xli-xlii).

Persian literature remained a guiding light for most of Heron-Allen's adult life, and he surrounded himself with mementos from the East. On his estate, purchased in 1906, he designed and built a large library to house his extensive collection of rare books and manuscripts; his bedroom faced a rose garden; a wooden footbridge displayed a motto carved in a foreign script; he called his wife "Nour-I-Máh;" and he displayed at least nine original Omar Khayyam



drawings by Gilbert James at “Large Acres,” his home, best remembered as “Nour-Khana.”

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