



BAILLIE, FRASER JAMES

FRASER JAMES BAILLIE, 15th laird of Reelig (1783-1856), traveler, writer, and artist. He was the eldest son of Edward Satchell Fraser and grandson of James Fraser, the author of *The History of Nadir Shah* (London, 1742). Born in Edinburgh, he spent his boyhood in the family home at Moniack (now Reelig House) in the Scottish Highlands near Inverness, where this land-owning branch of the Fraser clan had been settled since the 15th century. Fraser was tutored at home before attending school in Edinburgh. At the age of sixteen he went to Berbice, Guyana, to manage his debt-encumbered family's sugar and cotton plantations. The venture was not a success, and in 1811 he returned to Scotland.

Unable to find suitable employment at home, Fraser set sail early in January 1813 for India where all four of his brothers were employed by the East India Co. (q.v.). After a short-lived business partnership in Calcutta, he traveled north to join his second brother William in a strenuous three-month tour of the Himalayan hill states (May-July 1815), during which he sketched and mapped uncharted country, collected geological specimens; and kept a detailed journal (Archer and Falk, pp. 19-57). Fraser returned to Calcutta from Delhi in June 1816. He again tried his hand unsuccessfully at commerce while remaining much more interested in painting and writing. He was also homesick and in May 1820 left Calcutta for good. In the same year, his 548 page *Journal* and twenty superb aquatints of his Himalayan water colors were published in London.

From Calcutta, Fraser traveled first to Delhi, then through Rajasthan to



Bombay, where he joined Dr. Andrew Jukes bound for Persia on a mission for the East India Co. The pair reached Būšehr on 4 August 1821, then traveled via Shiraz to Isfahan, where Jukes died of cholera, leaving Fraser to continue to Tehran with Dr. John McNeill (later Sir John) who had ridden post-haste from Tehran in a vain attempt to save Juke's life. This was the beginning of a life-long friendship between the two men. From Tehran, dressed as a Persian merchant and accompanied by his black servant from Barbice and a small retinue, Fraser traveled to Mašhad by the well-trodden route through Semnān, Šāhrūd, and Nīšāpūr. Because of political turmoil, he abandoned plans to go to Bukhara and Samarkand; instead, after six weeks in Mašhad, he turned west and on 11 March 1822 left for Rādkān, Qūčān, and Bojnūrd, traveling through lawless and little-known Turkman country to Astarābād in Gorgān, then along the Caspian littoral, through Rašt, and inland to Ardabīl and Tabrīz. From there, after a detour to Lake Urmia, he returned to England via Tiflis, Odessa, and Vienna, reaching home in late January 1823 after an absence of ten years. Fraser was married later in the year to his cousin Jane Tytler, daughter of Lord Woodhouselee, a distinguished Scottish lawyer. They had no children.

For the next decade, Fraser divided his time between London and Scotland and wrote seven lengthy books of travel and fiction, all but one with a Persian background. Of these the most interesting are *Narrative of a Journey into Khorasan in the Years 1821 and 1822, Including Some Account of the Countries to the North-east of Persia with Remarks upon the National Character, Government and Resources of that Kingdom* (London, 1825), *Travels and Adventures in the Persian Provinces of the Southern Banks of the Caspian Sea, with an Appendix Containing Short Notices on the Geology and Commerce of Persia* (London, 1826), and *An Historical and Descriptive Account of Persia from the Earliest Ages to the Present Time* (Edinburgh, 1834). All three are packed with information, some of it, as Fraser himself acknowledged, gathered from earlier writers but much of it new, on the nature of the country, its government and leading personalities, revenues, army, religion, buildings, etc. He strongly criticizes the character of the Persians, blaming it on their despotic and “hated” Qajar rulers. He gives a rare first-hand description of the Turkman tribes and of the shrines in Qom and Mašhad, entering the former in disguise and the latter openly after having professed the *šahāda* and been proclaimed a Muslim (Fraser of Reelig papers LV, pp. 180-81; *Narrative of a Journey*, pp. 510-11). Though he was unable to visit the great natural fortress of Kalāt-e nāderī, he describes it in some detail in one of his many appendices, which, *inter alia*, include latitudes and longitudes, temperatures, routes, local



resources and manufactures, exports, and imports, as well as information about Bukhara and the other Transoxianian khanates. *An Historical and Descriptive Account of Persia*, illustrated with his own drawings, was in its day the most encyclopedic account of the country in the English language.

Nāder Shah was the central figure in Fraser's first two long, rambling romances, each in three volumes: *The Kuzzilbash: A Tale of Khorasan* (3 vols., London, 1828), and its sequel, *The Persian Adventurer, being the Sequel of the Kuzzilbash* (3 vols., London, 1830). Fraser was not a Persian scholar and it is unlikely that they were, as he states, translated and adapted by him for the English reader from a vernacular document; more probably they were based on a number of sources including his grandfather's *A History of Nadir Shah. Tales of the Caravanserai: the Khan's Tale* (London, 1833) was another long historic romance set in Fraser's favorite Turkman country during Nāder Shah's reign. All make heavy reading today.

Fraser's books and travels established him as a Persian expert, and in 1833 the British government, alarmed by Russian expansionist policies, invited him to visit Persia and Mesopotamia and report secretly on Russian activities and influence and the extent of the Ottoman government's authority over its Kurdish tribes. His instructions were signed by the Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston and endorsed by King George IV (Public Record Office, F.O. 60/33). Fraser left London on this mission at the end of December 1833. He did not return until May 1835, having traveled over 10,000 miles, almost all "Tartar or post," i.e., on horseback and alone except for a small native retinue under difficult and often dangerous conditions, including severe winter weather, no small achievement for a man of over 50. He went out and back via Vienna, Constantinople, Erzurum, and Tabrīz to Tehran, which served as his base for two separate journeys (i) May-July 1834: Tehran, Mašhad, Rādkān, Bojnūrd, Čašma 'Alī, Tehran and (ii) August 1834-March 1835: Tehran, Āmol, Rašt, Tabrīz, Urmia, Sāvoj Bolāg (Mahābād), Solaymānīya, Baghdad, Kermānšāh, Tehran; then back to London as he had come.

On return, he was employed by the Foreign Office on a number of tasks until 1839. First, he submitted several lengthy memoranda on conditions in Persia and Mesopotamia together with recommendations. He saw Persia and Afghanistan as vital barriers against Russian moves toward India and wanted the independence of the former maintained "at all hazards." The purpose of the British mission in Tehran was "resistance to the power and progress of Russia" and "the annihilation of Russian influence" there. To this end, he



recommended that Britain should interfere “as delicately as may be but decidedly and directly” in the government of Persia, that the “pro-Russian” Qā'em-maqām should be dismissed and the British minister “a nobleman or gentleman of rank and character,” aided by a carefully selected British physician, become the power behind the Peacock Throne. He also recommended that Britain should form defensive alliances with the Transoxianian khanates and through subsidies become the main influence “in every Asiatic state from the Indus to the Bosphorus” (Public Record Office, F.O. 60/38).

In June 1836 Fraser was appointed escort officer or *mehmāndār* to the three Qajar princes, Rezāqolī Mīrzā, Teymūr Mīrzā, and Najafqolī Mīrzā, who had come to London to seek help and protection from the British government. He escorted them throughout their three-month stay in London and with his wife and sister-in-law accompanied them by carriage across Europe to Constantinople on their return to Baghdad. Fraser's advocacy was an important factor in the British government's decision to support them with an annual pension of 2,000 pounds. In June 1838 Fraser was told by the Foreign Office that they could offer him no further employment (Fraser of Reelig papers, bundle 100, Backhouse to Fraser, 23 June 1838). Nevertheless, he was called to act as *mehmāndār* to Ḥosayn Khan Moqaddam Marāḡa 'īNezām-al-Dawla, the *ājūdān bāšī* (q.v.), during his brief mission to London in June-July 1839 and made the record of his two difficult sessions with Palmerston (Public Record Office, F0 60/68).

During 1835-38, Fraser was also employed by the Foreign Office in writing articles and pamphlets designed to awaken the public to the Russian menace. In this he was helped for a time by John McNeill, temporarily back from Tehran, and David Urquart, both as paranoid about Russia as himself (Rawlinson, pp. 53-54). Meanwhile, Fraser continued to write books. Accounts of his travels appeared in 1838 and 1840: *A Winter's Journey (Tartar) from Constantinople to Tehran, with Travels through Various Parts of Persia* (2 vols., London, 1838) and *Travels in Koordistan, Mesopotamia, etc. Including an Account of Parts of Those Countries hitherto Unvisited by Europeans with Sketches of the Character and Manners of the Koordish and Arab Tribes* (2 vols., London, 1840). Both books contained much detailed information about places, ancient sites, scenery, and, above all, peoples—Turkmans, Gilānīs, Kurds, and Arabs—almost unknown to the West. These books also contain brief contemporary accounts of the problems caused by the death of 'Abbās Mīrzā



(q.v.) and Fath-‘Alī Shah, and the struggle for the accession. His *Mesopotamia and Assyria from the Earliest Ages to the Present Time* (Edinburgh, 1842) was another useful encyclopedic work, while his two-volume *Narrative of the Residence of the Persian Princes in London in 1835 and 1836 with an Account of Their Journey from Persia and Subsequent Adventures* (London, 1838) is a useful, if rather pedestrian, record of an interesting episode in Anglo-Persian relations.

Persia again provided Fraser with a background for two immensely long historical romances: *Allee Neemroo the Buchtiaree Adventurer: A Tale of Loristan* (3 vols., London, 1842) and *The Dark Falcon: A Tale of the Attruck* (4 vols., London, 1844). The latter, set mainly in Turkman country during the power struggle between Zands and Qajars, contains events and incidents which, according to Fraser’s preface, are “all historically correct.” Fraser’s last book was a two-volume memoir of his old Delhi friend James Skinner, founder of “Skinner’s Horse” (the famous Irregular Cavalry Regiment of the East India Company) based in part on Skinner’s own journal written in Persian (*Military Memoir of Lieut.-Col. James Skinner, CB*, 2 vols., London, 1851).

In 1835, on the death of his father, Fraser had become the 15th laird of Reelig. After his Foreign Office employment ended, he returned to the family home in Scotland and devoted himself to writing, local affairs, and the rehabilitation of his large but debt-ridden estate. To the end, he kept up a lively correspondence with his great friend John McNeill who, on leaving Persia, had settled in Edinburgh. Fraser died at Moniack on 23 January 1856 and was buried in the family vault at nearby Kirkhill.

Though his historical romances have long since ceased to be read, his travel books remain an important source of information. Curzon praised his “faithful portraiture of every aspect of modern Persian life” and considered him as “incomparably the best authority on the Northern provinces” (*Persian Question* I, pp. 24, 356). Politically, Fraser was a hawk and his ideas were often neither sound nor practical. He is best remembered as an intrepid but careful traveler who, through curiosity and diligence, contributed much to contemporary knowledge of the lands through which he traveled.



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