



## FRYER, JOHN

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**FRYER, JOHN** (b. ca. 1650; d. London, 31 March 1733), British travel-writer and doctor, the eldest son of William Fryer of London (British East India Company, but certainly a Court Minute of the Company, dated 11 September 1672, records his appointment as “a Chyrurgeon for Surat” and a subsequent letter provides details of his remuneration at “50s. per month to commence at his arriveall” (Fryer, 1909-15, I, p. xiii).

On 9 December 1672 Fryer sailed from Gravesend with the annual fleet of the East India Company on the *Unity*, under the command of William Cruft, the very captain and ship which were to take the young Edmond Halley (1656-1742) to the island of St. Helena in the southern Atlantic four years later to observe the transit of Mercury across the Sun. On the Island of Johanna (Nzwani, one of the islands of the Comoros archipelago in the Indian Ocean), Fryer made some important observations concerning the antiscorbutic qualities of oranges and limes. Fryer arrived in Masulipatnam, the earliest English settlement on the Coromandel coast (southeastern coast of the Indian peninsula), on 26 June 1673. Then he sailed on to Madras and subsequently arrived in Bombay around Cape Comorin (Kanyakumari), exactly a year after leaving England. He was not to return to England until the August of 1682. His eight years in the East furnished the materials for his *New Account of East-India and Persia, in Eight Letters*, which he published in 1698 (Fryer, 1698).

Although his writings fail to rival those of his French contemporaries Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605-89), and François Bernier (1625-88), they display a lively curiosity, which, sharpened by his scientific training, produces accurate



observations in geology, meteorology, and all aspects of natural history. Fryer also provides some shrewd insights into the nature of Mughal government in the later years of Awrangzeb's reign (r. 1658-1707), such as how the generals and news-writers "consult to deceive the Emperor, on whom he depends for a true state of things" (Fryer, 1909-15, II, p. 52). Tending towards the Anglicanism and royalism of Sir Thomas Browne (1605-82), whose *Religio Medici* he admired, Fryer exhibited a certain unenlightened prejudice against Hindu "idolators," balanced by his contempt for the "impostor" Mohammad. Despising the "fanaticism" of the "Hodges" (*k'āja*, here meaning 'a man of religion'), Fryer preferred to fast on 30 January to honor the martyrdom of Charles I of England (r. 1625-49).

His professional background makes Fryer a valuable commentator upon contemporary medicine as practiced in Surat, where there is "no formal Graduation, Examination or Proof of their Proficiency" (Fryer, 1909-15, I, p. 286). He finds little skill in anatomy, surgery, or pharmacy; the Indians are "Martyrs to death by Leeches, clapping on an hundred at once [...] They pretend to understand the Pulse, but the Urine they will not look on" (Fryer, 1909-15, I, p. 287). In recording, however, that some Indian physicians blame elephantiasis upon "bad Water (to which, as we to the Air, they attribute all Diseases)," he unintentionally points to inadequate Western theories of the disease (Fryer, 1909-15, I, p. 139).

Fryer became interested in the effects of climate upon health and took the opportunity of continuing his studies by sailing on the *Scipio Africanus* for the Persian Gulf. Arriving at Gombroon ([Bandar-e 'Abbās](#)) on 22 March 1677, Fryer noted that the "Company's Trade is but small here," exporting only drugs, fine "*Carmania* Wool, Goats, Dates, and Horses" (Fryer, 1909-15, II, p. 164), but with the [Dutch East India Company](#) controlling the substantial imports of cloth and spices from India and the Moluccas (the Maluku Islands; see [INDIA xiii. INDO-IRANIAN COMMERCIAL RELATIONS](#)).

Returning to his avocation, Fryer argues that the illegality of dissection, here as in India, hampered the study of anatomy and effective surgery. Fryer admires "the ingenious Sir Thomas Herbert," who had visited Persia exactly 50 years earlier, but whereas Sir [Thomas Herbert](#) (1606-82) had praised Safavid doctors, noting their preference for vegetable, rather than mineral, drugs, Fryer will not be impressed. He admits the superb variety of medicinal herbs available in apothecary shops, but criticizes Persian doctors' ignorance of extracts and essences of plants and roots, and inefficient methods of



dispensing. He notes the endemic diseases of Persia, including “Phrensies, Plurisies, [...] distempers of the Eyes;” “But the fashionable Malady of the Country is a Clap, scarce One in Ten being free from it” (Fryer, 1909-15, III, p. 97). If eye disease is caused by irritant sand (Idem, II, p. 170), the etiology of syphilis, Fryer insists, is specifically cultural and Islamic, namely: “the unbounded Liberty of Women, Cheapness of the Commodity’, and the encouragement of their filthy Law” (Idem, III, p. 98).

“The Books of greatest vogue, are those of *Corge Nessir Tussi* (Kvāja Naṣir-al-Din Ṭusi [1201-74], the polymath, philosopher, and astronomer); the ‘Rouze el Saphet’ (the universal history *Rowzat al-ṣafā* [‘Garden of Purity’] of Mirkvānd); and ‘A Book, like our *Æsop*’s Fables, called *Emuel Sohaly*’ (*Anwār-e sohayli* of Ḥosayn Wā‘eḏ Kāšefi [d. 1505], the Persian version of Bidpai; see Fryer, 1909-15, III, pp. 70, 82, 83). He considered Persian scientists and intellectuals “as rare as Black Swans;” theoretically shackled to Aristotelian thinking and “the *ipse dixit* of their Prophet,” they were practically impeded by a serious lack of scientific equipment.

Fryer was impressed by the stately mercantile buildings, the gardens and ice-houses of the Safavid capital, Isfahan; he appreciated the wines of Shiraz, and the nightingales of its groves, but, though he praises the “sweet Singers of *Siras*” (the muezzins), he makes no mention of Hāfeḏ or Sa’di. His description of the ruins at Persepolis is interesting, especially as in 1677 he counts 18 pillars standing in the Hall of Xerxes (William Francklin in 1787 records 15 [Francklin, p. 93], their diminishing number pointing to the regularity of catastrophic earthquakes). Fryer is dismissive of superstitious Muslim explanations of earthquakes and falling stars, but on his return to India his spectacular description of Newton’s Comet of 1780 reveals his European fear of its proving “ominous,” contrasting with the Indians who “disclaim its Influence here” (Fryer, 1909-15, III, p. 175).

Fryer was presumably in practice after his return to England in 1682; he was elected fellow of the Royal Society in 1697, and a review entitled “An Abstract with Some Reflections on a *New Account of East-India and Persia*” was published in the Society’s *Philosophical Transactions* of 1698 (see Bibliography). In the summer of that year he married a niece of Rose Desborough, *née* Hobson, the second wife of Samuel Desborough (1619-90), keeper of the great seal of Scotland. They had at least one daughter, Anna Maria Sanderson, to whom letters of administration were granted on 14 April 1733. Fryer died on 31 March 1733, at his Bread Street home in the parish of



All Hallows in London (*Gentleman's Magazine*, April 1733, p. 214).

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R. White, portrait of John Fryer, reproduced in *A New Account of East India and Persia* (1698).