



GREAT BRITAIN XIV. BRITISH SCHOOLS IN PERSIA

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This article will outline the major educational efforts of the British missionaries in Persia from 1871. The British schools in Persia were primarily founded by missionary organizations, most notably the Church Missionary Society (CMS). In 1869, the missionary Robert Bruce and his wife, on their way to India, stayed in Persia to improve their Persian. They based themselves in Jolfā, on the outskirts of Isfahan, where foreigners were permitted to reside. During their stay, Persia experienced a severe famine between 1871-72. With the help of money sent from Germany, Bruce and his wife started a small orphanage and industrial school serving both Muslims and Armenians. This later became a Christian boys' board-ing school in 1895, before closing completely two years later. At about the same time, at the request of the Armenians, the Bruces set up schools for boys and girls. The former was under Armenian charge while the latter was run by Mrs. Emily Bruce until 1884 when she was joined by Miss Isabella Read of the Society for the Promotion of Female Education in the East. The CMS officially began work in Persia from 1875, first in Jolfā and later in Isfahan, Kermān, Yazd, and Shiraz.

By 1877 the Bruces had also begun classes for Persian boys and girls, although



Muslim boys were forbidden by local religious leaders to enroll. Attendance was sporadic until 1895, when, for the first time, 35 boys attended for a full year without disruption. By 1882 the vocational school was providing women with employment skills in weaving, shoemaking, and tailoring. Agitation and disturbances continued to disrupt the boys' school which nevertheless grew in size and influence. In 1904, the boys' school transferred to Isfahan while the girls' school continued in Jolfā until 1912, when, together with its recently opened hostel, it also moved to new buildings in Isfahan where it provided customary education and domestic studies. One year later a high school department and hostel were added to the boys' school. William Thompson arrived as principal in 1914 and remained in charge until 1935 when he became the Anglican Bishop in Iran.

Soon after Thompson's arrival new buildings were prepared for the boys' school, which moved in 1915 to new quarters, and was renamed the Stuart Memorial College (SMC) in memory of Bishop Stuart, the first missionary Bishop in Iran. A great deal of opposition from the local clerics followed, leading to the buildings being ransacked and damaged in the absence of the missionaries between 1915-16 during the First World War. The SMC reopened in 1921 and continued to grow in numbers and reopened in 1921 and continued to grow in numbers and prestige both in Persia and abroad, where it was considered to stand "on the highest level of the great missionary schools" (Hewitt, p. 384). The academic degree structure of the College combined the middle school, high school, and junior college programs, each with a two-year course. In 1939 the college was incorporated, along with other foreign schools, into Persia's secondary educational system as Adab High School (Dabirestān-e Adab; [Figure 1](#)) with a 6-year program leading to a high school diploma (see [EDUCATION xv](#)). At this time all British faculty and staff were replaced by Persian teachers and administrators.

Female education and industrial work also continued to progress. The latter was developed in 1923 by Miss Jessie Biggs who secured larger buildings for the work in Isfahan. Known as the Garden of Crafts (Bāḡ-e ṣan'ati), by 1935 it was providing maintenance for a girls' orphan-age and money towards CMS' medical work as well as employment for girls and women.

From the end of the 19th century, the CMS also began work in other towns. The Rev. Napier Malcolm developed boys' education in Yazd from 1900, while Miss Mary Bird held small classes for girls and women until 1902 when Miss Mary Ellen Brighty opened a Parsee girls' school. By 1907 both schools



included Zoroastrian and Muslim children. In 1922, a separate school was set up for Persian girls but four years later it merged with the Parsee establishment.

In Kermān, a boys' school began to operate soon after the arrival of the missionaries in 1897. Teaching was constantly disrupted and the school was often closed because of regular staff shortages. A girls' school eventually opened in 1921 under the leadership of Miss Janet Woodroffe, who continued as principal until the 1940's. Rev. Walter Rice offered education to boys in Shiraz from 1900 until 1911, when the mission station closed. The CMS restarted work in Shiraz in 1923, and three years later a girls' school was opened with the arrival of Miss Ella Gerrard.

All these schools encountered opposition at various times according to the politico-religious climate of Persia. Nevertheless, they continued to operate and by the 1920's the educational work of the British CMS was flourishing. In 1923, the missionaries considered regularizing the education they offered in order to ensure the maintenance of high standards in the face of newly opened Government schools. By 1925 a central examination certificate was in place. However, by the late 1920's, anxiety was growing due to new government laws on the inclusion of Muslim religious education in all foreign schools. The mission schools did manage to continue, and in terms of girls' education, in particular, they still led the way in Persia.

By 1932 nationalist and anti-foreign feeling in Persia, together with increased centralization of the government's educational policy, were placing severe restrictions on the schools, threatening them with closure. The following year primary classes in all foreign schools were forcibly closed, resulting in a drastic reduction in student numbers. This especially affected the SMC, which had, since 1931, enlarged its preparatory section previously known as the College Branch School (*Madrassa-ye Šo'ba-ye Kālej*). The middle schools continued until 1941, when the government's nationalization policies led to the closure of most foreign schools including the SMC.

The three exceptions were the girls' schools in Isfahan, Yazd, and Shiraz, whose principals were all Persian nationals. In Isfahan, the Stileman Memorial College – better known as *Dabirestān-e Behešt-āyin* and in Yazd, *Dabirestān-e Izad-paymān*, were purchased by the government. However they continued under the leadership of the two missionary sisters, Armenouhie and Nevarth Aidin, respectively. *Dabirestān-e Mehr-āyin* in Shiraz was bought by its



principal Ella Gerrard and was recognized as an independent school by the government. These establishments were maintained until the time of the oil nationalization crises in the early 1950's. At that stage, strong anti-British sentiment meant the two Aidin sisters were eventually ousted and Ella Gerrard sold Mehr-āyin.

After the Iranization of the diocese in 1961, primary, secondary, and high schools were established under Persian leadership. Extensive welfare work for blind men and women flourished under Persian Christians, who employed German, Dutch, and British missionaries to aid them. The Nur-āyin home for blind girls and women in Isfahan remained under the Church's control until 1987 when it became the last Christian institution to be taken over by the Islamic government.

Apart from the CMS, other British missionary organizations were also responsible for schools in Iran. In 1886, a mission was established in the Northwest of Iran commissioned by the Archbishop of Canterbury. By 1888, there were a number of schools operating in Urumia and surrounding districts. The mission, however, was always small and, with only limited resources, it closed down at the start of the First World War. Another important organization was the Churches Mission to the Jews (CMJ) which worked in Persia from 1844. The CMJ provided the only British schools in Tehran other than the embassy school which was for foreign children only. The latter opened much later in the 20th century and was concerned with providing education which complied with U.K. standards for the children of government and other British workers in Persia. The CMJ's educational work began under Mirzā Nur-Allāh and Rev. James Garland, first in Tehran and later in Isfahan (Jolfā and Jubāra) from 1890. Having a precarious existence, the Isfahan schools finally closed in 1928 due to unfavorable government policies. However, the CMJ boys' and girls' schools in Tehran continued under the Rev. Jālinus Ḥakim and Miss Gertrude Nur-Allāh. In 1968, the work of the CMJ was fully and officially integrated into the work of the Anglican Diocese of Iran.



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