



HOUTUM-SCHINDLER, ALBERT

HOUTUM-SCHINDLER, Sir **ALBERT**, authority on Persia, engineer and employee of the Persian government for over thirty years in the later 19th and early 20th centuries (b. 24 September 1846; d. Fenstanton near Cambridge, 15 June 1916; [Figure 1](#)). There is a lack of early biographical details. Some sources suggest that he was in fact Dutch and was born in Holland, though it was generally assumed he was German. During his own lifetime he divulged no information to biographical dictionaries; and in a brief obituary note his son was unable, or reluctant, to add any details. He was educated at Leipzig University, and became an engineer. His career in Persia began in 1868 in the Indo-European Telegraph Department, which recruited some of its engineers and superintendents from Germany. In 1876 he joined the Persian telegraph service as inspector-general, immediately responsible to Mirzā 'Ali-Qoli Khan Mok̄ber-al-Dawla, who had recently become Minister of Telegraphs. Houtum-Schindler was given the rank of general in the Persian army, a title he enjoyed using for the rest of his life though he was never in any sense a soldier. He established a close working relationship with Mok̄ber-al-Dawla; and the next few years saw the impressive extension of the telegraph network in Persia, with Mašhad, Sanandaj, Šuštār, and Nahāvand all brought into contact with the capital within two years of Houtum-Schindler's appointment. By the end of the 1870s, lines had been extended to Yazd and Kerman in the southeast, and Anzali and Firuzkuh in the north; and the number of telegraph stations had increased from 39 to 65. He was also associated with other activities of Mok̄ber-al-Dawla, who had become Minister for the Sciences and Mines. In 1882 Houtum-Schindler had been made managing director of the turquoise



mines in Khorasan, which Mok̄ber-al-Dawla had rented for a term of fifteen years from Nāṣer-al-Din Shah. He was the recognized specialist in all matters of mining and mineralogy, and investigated reports of discoveries of gold and precious metals for the shah. In 1883-84 he traveled with Mok̄ber-al-Dawla to Germany, partly to purchase equipment, including a vessel for pearl-diving in the Persian Gulf. George Nathaniel Curzon (q.v.) was not exaggerating when he said that Houtum-Schindler was regarded by both Persian authorities and foreigners “as a sort of *deus ex machina* required to assist in the solution of most Persian problems” (Curzon, *Persian Question* I, p. 477).

From the late 1880s Houtum-Schindler played an important part in the more systematic attempts of European capitalists and entrepreneurs to explore and develop the country’s natural resources. Sir Henry Drummond Wolff, the energetic British minister (1888-90), had tried to recruit him to the Legation staff; but de Reuter had already secured his services as an adviser, and Houtum-Schindler formally joined the newly established Imperial Bank in 1889, with a higher salary and greater responsibility, as its inspector of branches. He was also closely associated with two of its subsidiaries, becoming inspector-general of mines in the Persian Bank Mining Rights Corporation, and he was in charge of the road concessions held by the Imperial Bank. Both of these latter ventures failed; his management was in part held to be responsible, and he was dismissed in May 1894. He had been too optimistic in his estimate of the country’s resources and underestimated the structural difficulties in their effective exploitation (Jones, pp. 30, 57-58, 61-63). Despite these disappointments in the mid-1890s, he did not lose heart and put his considerable expertise at the disposal of Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah and the attempts at reform in the early years of the new reign. He drew up a blueprint for the wholesale reorganization of the administration in late 1896. As he himself put it, his nominal position was Director of the Foreign Office Control Department, but he was used as an adviser to the Persian Government in nearly all matters (Royal Geographical Society, RGS Correspondence, block 1881-1910, Houtum-Schindler to the secretary of the Royal Geographical Society, 4 September 1896). From 1896 to 1902, he was apparently at the office for inspecting concessions in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Bāmdād, *Rejāl* VI, pp. 85-86), and he was later in charge of the passport office in the same ministry; but he continued to advise the Persian government more generally, including on the subject of raising foreign loans (India Office Library, Curzon MSS, MSS Eur. F.111/353, Houtum-Schindler to Curzon, 1 September 1899).



For both the Persian government and the expatriate community, Houtum-Schindler's importance reached far beyond any official position he might have held. Unlike many of the foreign advisers employed by successive Persian governments, he was both loyal and knowledgeable. From its beginning in 1876, he was supportive of the idea of placing archeological discoveries in the Royal Museum and was opposed to their export unless on an exchange basis with European objects, which should also be displayed in the Royal Museum (Houtum-Schindler, 1968, pp. 206-8, Nasiri-Moghaddam, pp. 351-53). Severe and sometimes sardonic, he was forthright but fair in his criticisms and prepared to praise work of quality when it met his own high standards. He seemed genuinely attached to the two shahs whom he served, and there is a vivid anecdote of his reaction to the news of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's assassination in May 1896 (*JRAS* 49, 1917, pp. 649-50). He had built up over the decades an exceptional knowledge of the country, more than any other European in the late nineteenth century. Whilst supervising the telegraph and mining operations, he had traveled extensively throughout the land, often leaving Tehran for months at a time. Wherever he went, he collected data on distances, archeological and historical sites, dialects, ethnography, flora and fauna, population, and revenue statistics. He frequently surveyed the territory, and his more accurate readings helped to produce maps of the regions through which he traveled. As a result of his friendship with leading Persian notables, he had access to government records and used them in the many published descriptions of his itineraries. Through these contacts, he began to assemble a specialist library of Persian manuscripts and materials, many of which he bought from the most knowledgeable Persian bibliophiles of his day, Bahman Mirzā Bahā'-al-Dawla, Farhād Mirzā Mo'tamad-al-Dawla, and E'temād-al-Saltāna (qq.v.). His unique knowledge made him an invaluable source of information for European commercial organizations, as well for the foreign legations and European travelers who invariably sought his advice. Unusually self-effacing himself, he allowed others to make use of his remarkable learning.

Nowhere was this seen to better effect than in his relationship with Curzon, then an ambitious young M.P., who spent several months in 1889-90 traveling through Persia from the Russian frontier to the Persian Gulf. Most of the detailed statistical information on the army, population, distances, revenue, and much else in Curzon's great work, *Persia and the Persian Question* (1892), was obtained from Houtum-Schindler. Curzon handsomely acknowledged in the introduction (vol. I, p. xiii) that "few men so excellently qualified to write a



first-class book themselves would have lent such unselfish exertion to improve the quality of another man's work." In a private letter, after receiving the draft back with Houtum-Schindler's corrections, he wrote, "it is very rare indeed that a man can be fortunate enough to get his work revised by a much superior authority to himself" (William R. Perkins Library, Duke University, Curzon to Houtum-Schindler, 12 September 1891).

In all this erudition, Houtum-Schindler brought the exactitude and industry of a genuine scholar manqué. As Curzon rightly pointed out, he combined "the erudition of a scholar and the zeal of a pioneer" (Curzon, *Persian Question* I, p. xiii). His understanding of literary and colloquial Persian was impressive; he wrote more than one travelogue (*safar-nāma*) in Persian, he translated Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's account of his second journey to Europe into English, and put together a compilation of year books in two volumes for Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah to read in Persian. He published over fifty articles in the leading English, German, and Austrian orientalist, scientific, and geographical journals of the day, as well as in encyclopedias, official handbooks, and reference works. These covered a wide range of different subjects, embracing his early surveying and mapping expeditions into remote areas, his professional interests of mining, banking, and telegraphy, as well as demography, archaeology, climatology, dialects, weights, measures, and distances. Of all these, his article on the Zoroastrian community in Yazd and Kerman, "Die Parsen in Persien: ihre Sprache und einige ihrer Gebräuche" (*ZDMG* 36, 1882, pp. 54-88), praised by E. G. Browne as the best contemporary account of the Zoroastrians, and his pioneering studies on dialect are still of value, as is the detailed information provided in the many succinct accounts of his travels and his encyclopedia articles, notably that of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., pp. 187-202. The one book which he wrote, *Eastern Persian Irak* (London, 1896), a meticulous account of the region between Isfahan and Tehran, had been delayed in publication and was finally published by the Royal Geographical Society without including some of the exceptional information and source material he had in his possession (*Eastern Persian Irak*, pp. 118-19). There was also a lighter side to what seemed at times an austere personality. In earlier years he had had a reputation as a brilliant conversationalist, and he was a popular guest at the dinner tables of the expatriate community in Tehran (Nevill, p. 153).

Houtum-Schindler stayed on in Tehran long after the friends and colleagues of his youth had died or left. He had married twice. His first wife, Louise, whom



he married in 1870 shortly after his arrival in Persia, was the daughter of a Swedish physician, Conrad Fagergren (1818-79), resident for many years in Shiraz, and the grand-daughter of an Italian general in the Persian army, Barthelemy Semino. She died in about 1879, and a few years later, in 1884, he married an English woman, Florence, with whom he had two sons, Alexander and Leonard. They lived just north of the Bāḡ-e Lālazār, in a house situated between the Austrian Legation and the properties of Şani'-al-Dawla and Mokber-al-Molk, the next generation of the Hedāyat family with whom he had been so closely associated. In these years, with the disappointment of his hopes for reform in the early years of Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah's reign and the decline of British influence in the years immediately before the Constitutional Revolution, he became more withdrawn, though he held the post of honorary consul-general for Sweden from 1902 to 1911. He still commanded a position of great respect as seen in a traveler's account written in 1903, "Latterly he has not been in the best of health, and he seldom goes outside the walls of his compound, but he is still the source of information to which all travellers instinctively turn, and from whom no-one has ever been sent empty away . . . (He is) now a trifle pessimistic about the future of Persia, and especially about the future of British interests in Persia . . . It is still a liberal education in all things Persian to go and sit in his study in the afternoon where he is surrounded by newspapers and magazines in every European tongue, all of which he diligently reads, and to hear him discourse on a subject about which it may truly be said that he has forgotten more than most people have ever known" (Whigham, pp. 322-23).

In the new era of the Constitutional Revolution, it is not known where his sympathies lay or what he thought about the new circumstances. With the Hedāyat family even more at the center of affairs, and one of Houtum-Schindler's sons, Alexander, employed in the Imperial Bank and then by Morgan Shuster during his mission to reform the Persian Treasury in 1911, it is likely that he remained as well-informed as ever; but he took no part in the momentous events that took place within a few hundred yards of his house. He had a reputation for not commenting on contemporary events, as Joseph Maxwell Hone, an Irish writer who stayed in Tehran in 1908, remarked: ". . . the great Oriental scholar, Dr Schindler, more Persian than the Persians themselves, lived round the corner, but he was a recluse and would not discuss politics" (*The Sheffield Independent*, 6 December 1915). The only reference to his name being invoked in these years was when the Tabriz nationalists addressed an open letter to him and to four other Tehran



residents in June 1909, protesting against the aggressions of the Russian troops on their entry into Tabriz (Browne, *Persian Revolution*, p. 275).

In the spring of 1911, Houtum-Schindler, now in his mid-sixties and increasingly crippled by gout, left Persia after having lived there for over forty-two years. After his second marriage he had become a naturalized Englishman; and he and his wife returned to live in England, at first near Wimbledon, and then at Fenstanton, a few miles from Cambridge. There he re-established contact with two Cambridge orientalists, Guy Le Strange and E. G. Browne, both of whom he had met in the 1880s in Persia. They had remained intermittently in contact in the intervening years. Browne now sent him the drafts of *The Press and Poetry of Modern Persia* for his comments and consulted him on particular points. Houtum-Schindler lent or gave both Browne and Le Strange manuscripts from the precious library, which he had continue to add to until the time he left Tehran and which he was able to bring back safely. He died in 1916 in his home at Fenstanton, even in this last phase of his life just as deeply involved in Persian scholarship.

The contents of his library are indicative of his tastes, and the depth of his scholarly interests. Amongst over sixty manuscripts and seventy-five lithographs, unusually there was almost no poetry, belles-lettres, and Sufism—which he dismissed as worthless—and few religious or philosophical texts. Instead, he collected historical and geographical manuscripts, local history, language and dialects, material medica, and rare works on mineralogy and precious stones. Browne commented that he had never seen a collection of manuscripts “so well chosen for a definite purpose of study, or so clearly reflecting the outlook of him who formed it” (*JRAS* 49, 1917, p. 662). Two of these lapidaries he had translated and annotated; but neither of these, nor the abstracts that he made of the extant Persian translation of Ḥasan b. Moḥammad b. Ḥasan’s *Ketāb ta’rik Qom* (History of Qom) and the so-called letters of Rašid-al-Din Fażl-Allāh, usually thought to be fictitious, has ever been published. The more important of his manuscripts and lithographs were bought by Browne, though, alas, almost all the notes and miscellaneous material he had collected for over forty years were destroyed by Houtum-Schindler sometime before his death.

That was in keeping with his self-effacing, reserved personality. The few of his letters that have survived in the private collections of others show him to be touchy, opinionated, but immensely erudite, generous with his knowledge, and even with his manuscripts. He felt, perhaps with some justification, that



he had not been sufficiently acknowledged, either by those individuals whom he helped or by the Persian and English governments, despite the Order of the Lion and the Sun (first class) and a K.C.I.E. He complained to Curzon that “I have done much for others, but they either ignored me altogether or only went so far as to say that they ‘had made use of my notes.’” (Curzon MSS, Eur. F.111/58-59, 27 June 1892). An example of the former is the first American ambassador, S. W. G. Benjamin, whose section on silk in *Persia and the Persians* (Boston and London, 1887, pp. 414-22) came directly from Houtum-Schindler, but without any acknowledgement. However, some Persian scholars, as diverse as E‘temād-al-Salṭana (*Matla‘ al-šams* III, p. 46) and Ḥasan Taqizāda (*Maqālāt-e Taqizāda* IV, p. 129), recognized in print his remarkable achievements, the latter describing him as “the greatest scholar of contemporary Iran in his own time.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anon., “Sir Albert Houtum-Schindler,” *Geographical Journal* 48, 1916, p. 179.

E. G. Browne, *Press and Poetry*, pp. xl, 154.

Idem, “The Persian Manuscripts of the late Sir Albert Houtum-Schindler, K.C.I.E.,” *JRAS* 49, 1917, pp. 657-94.

Mehdi-Qoli Khan Hedāyat, *Kāṭerāt o kaṭarāt*, Tehran, 1965-66, pp. 43, 46.

A. Houtum-Schindler, “The Persian Government Telegraphs,” *Journal of the Society of Telegraphic Engineers* 5, 1876, pp. 262-68.

Idem, “Die Parsen in Persien: ihre Sprache und einige ihrer Gebräuche,” *ZDMG* 36, 1882, pp. 54-88.

Idem, “Beiträge zum kurdischen Wortschatze,” *ZDMG* 38, 1884, pp. 43-116.

Idem, *Eastern Persia and Irak*, London, 1896.



Idem, "Geography and statistics," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 10th ed., 1902, XXXI, pp. 614-30; 11th ed., 1911, XXI, pp. 187-202.

Idem, "Safar-nāma-ye Khorāsān," in *Seh Safar-nāma*, ed. Q. Rawšani, Tehran, 1968, pp. 145-211.

Geoffrey Jones, *Banking and Empire in Iran*, Cambridge, 1986, pp. 29-31, 57-58, 61-63, 101, 143, 145.

M-N. Nasiri-Moghaddam, "Les missions archéologiques françaises et la question des antiquités en Perse (1884-1914)," thèse 3e cycle, Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris, 2002, pp. 351-53.

R. Nevill, *Unconventional Memories*, London, 1921, p. 153.

C. E. Stewart, *Through Persia in Disguise*, London, 1911, pp. 209-13.

Sayyed Ḥasan Taqizāda, *Maqālāt-e Taqi-zāda* IV, ed. I. Afšār, Tehran, 1974, p. 129.

H. J. Whigham, *The Persian Problem*, London, 1903, pp. 322-23.