



OUSELEY, WILLIAM

OUSELEY, Sir WILLIAM, officer and orientalist (b. 1767 in Monmouthshire, Wales; d. September 1842, Boulogne, France). He was the elder brother of the entrepreneur, diplomat, and orientalist Sir Gore Ouseley (1770-1844; q.v.) and a cousin of the Methodist preacher and missionary Gideon Ouseley (1762-1839).

The Ouseleys were an Anglo-Irish family, and the brothers William and Gore were educated privately together with their cousin Gideon. In 1787, the brothers left Wales. While Gore became an entrepreneur in India, William went to Paris to study, and became interested in Persian literature. Between 1788 and 1794, he served as officer in the 8th Regiment of Dragoons, the King's Royal Irish Regiment, which at that time was stationed in India and fought, for example, in the Fourth Mysore War (1789-91). In 1794, when his regiment was engaged in the West Indies and Flanders, Major Ouseley sold his commission, and went to Leiden to resume his Persian studies. Ouseley's first book, the famous *Persian Miscellanies: An Essay to Facilitate the Reading of Persian Manuscripts*, appeared in London in 1795, and was dedicated to Lord Francis Rawdon Hastings (1754-1826), who in 1813 would be appointed Governor-General of India. In 1796, Ouseley returned to England; and a year later received an honorary LL.D. at Trinity College, Dublin, and a Dr. phil. h. c. at the Alma Mater Rostochiensis, Rostock, Germany. In 1800, Charles Lord Cornwallis (1738-1805), who from 1786 to 1793 had been Governor-General of India, had him knighted in recognition of his promotion of oriental studies.

After his return to Britain, Ouseley married Julia Irving in 1796, and the couple



took up residence in Crickhowell, Brecknockshire. They had six sons and three daughters. Their oldest son William Gore Ouseley (1797-1866) was a diplomat who published highly discussed books and pamphlets on the US institutions and the slave trade.

Ouseley's life as gentleman-scholar is marked by his unsuccessful efforts to obtain government support for a journey to Iran and by his unfulfilled ambition to become a government envoy to a Near-Eastern court. It was the diplomatic career of his brother Gore that allowed William to make the personal acquaintance of the Qajar envoy Abu'l-Ḥasan Kān Ilči (1776-1845; q.v.), who visited England between 1809 and 1810, and to become his brother's secretary when between 1810 and 1815 Gore traveled as the British ambassador to the Qajar court in Tehran. Ouseley's memoir of *Travels in Various Countries of the East* is an important source of British-Persian politics during the Napoleonic Wars.

Ouseley was a prolific author and avid manuscript collector. His list of publications indicates that he followed the double strategy of publishing texts for the general reader as well as for specialists. Between 1797 and 1801, Ouseley published the *Epitome*, his extracts of the Safavid chronicle *Jahānārā* by Qāzi Aḥmad b. Moḥammad Ġaffāri (d. 1567), a Persian translation of the tenth-century description of the Islamic world by the geographer Ebn Ḥawqal (d. after 973), the *Bakṭiār-nāma* (q.v.), a Persian tale in the style of the widely popular *Arabian Nights*. The *Bakṭiār-nāma* was especially successful with English audiences, and stayed in print throughout the nineteenth century (London, 1814; Bombay, 1844; rev. ed. by W. A. Clouston, n. p., 1883), while the great French orientalist Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838) prepared a French translation of Ebn Ḥawqal's geography (Paris, 1802). Ouseley was a member of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta, as well as an honorary fellow of the Royal Societies of Edinburgh, Göttingen, and Amsterdam, and contributed extensively to the Royal Society of Literature. Many of his academic contributions were published in the *Oriental Collections*, the three volumes of which appeared in London between 1797 and 1800. In the 1830s, Ouseley sold his manuscript collection, which according to his own *Catalogue of Several Hundred Manuscript Works in Various Oriental Languages* comprised more than seven-hundred items. But he continued his scholarly work, and published excerpts from the geographical works by Ṣadeq Eṣfahānī (c. 1609-c. 1650) and the translation of contemporary *Arabic Proverbs* that had been collected by the Swiss traveler and orientalist John Lewis (Johann Ludwig) Burckhardt



(1784-1817).

William Ouseley, as well as his brother Gore, continued the pioneering work of William Jones (1746-94; q.v.) in the field of Persian studies in Great Britain. Jones and the Ouseley brothers shared the experience of extended stays in India, and their careers in turn illustrate how Great Britain's economic interests in India indirectly promoted Persian studies (q.v. [GREAT BRITAIN X. IRANIAN STUDIES](#) – FORMATIVE YEARS). The necessity successfully to interact with the Persian culture of the Mughal and other Muslim courts on the subcontinent stimulated and justified research on all aspects of Persian arts and letters. Yet William Ouseley's struggle to raise money for travel to Iran and the dispersion of his manuscript collection document the downside of scholarly work without the official support of an academic institution.

Works of William Ouseley:

1. *Monographs: Persian Miscellanies: An Essay to Facilitate the Reading of Persian Manuscripts, with Engraved Specimens, Philological Observations, and Notes Critical and Historical*, London, 1795. *The Oriental Collections: Consisting of Original Essays and Dissertations, Translations and Miscellaneous Papers, Illustrating the History and Antiquities, the Arts, Sciences, and Literatures of Asia, 3 vols., London, 1797-1800.* *Observations on Some Medals and Gems, Bearing Inscriptions in the Pahlavi or Ancient Persick Character, London, 1801.* *Travels in Various Countries of the East: More Particularly Persia, 3 vols., London, 1819-23.* *Catalogue of Several Hundred Manuscript Works in Various Oriental Languages, London, 1831.*

2. Editions and translations of Arabic and Persian literature:

Qāzi Aḥmad Ġaffāri, *Epitome of the Ancient History of Persia*, ed. and trans. William Ouseley, London, 1799. Ebn Ḥawqal, *Masālek al-mamālek: The Oriental Geography of Ebn Haukal, an Arabian Traveller of the Tenth Century*, trans. from Persian by William Ouseley, London, 1800. *The Bakhtyar Nameh, or Story of Prince Bakhtyar and the Ten Viziers*, ed. and trans. William Ouseley, London 1801. *Arabic Proverbs, or the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, ed. William Ouseley, trans. John Lewis Burckhardt, London, 1830. Ṣādeq Eṣfahānī, *The Geographical Works*, ed. and trans. from Persian by William Ouseley, with *Critical Essay on Various Manuscript Works, Arabic and Persian, Illustrating the History of Arabia, Persia, Turkomania, India, Syria, Egypt, Mauritania, and Spain*, trans. J. C., Publications of the Oriental Translation



Fund of Great Britain and Ireland 20, London, 1832.

3. Unpublished Documents:

Letters, 1794 and 1809. James Marshall and Marie-Louise Osborn Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

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Abbas Amanat, “Hamrāh-e Mirzā Šāleḡ az Eşfahān be ẘehrān” *Āyanda* 9, 1983, pp. 36-49, 86.

Stanley Lane-Poole, “Ouseley, Sir William 1767-1842,” in *Dictionary of National Biography*, CD-ROM, Oxford, 1995, first published 1894.