



SYKES, ELLA CONSTANCE

SYKES, Ella Constance (b. Stoke Damerel, Devon, England, 11 November 1863; d. London, 23 March 1939), traveler and writer who wrote about Iran. Ella was the eldest child of the Rev. William Sykes, chaplain to British forces, and the sister of [Percy M. Sykes](#). She was educated at Plymouth high school and the Royal School for the Daughters of Officers in Bath. From 1881 to 1883, she studied at the newly founded Lady Margaret Hall at Oxford.

She paid two visits to Persia, spending nearly three years there in all. The first took place in October 1894, when Percy Sykes invited her to accompany him on his trip to the districts of Kerman and Baluchistan, where he was being sent to establish British consulates. She spent two years in the interior of Persia and was one of the first European women to visit these parts. Ella also traveled with her brother on his subsequent missions along the Persian Gulf, visiting the major coastal settlements on the way, and spent the winter of 1896-97 with him in Tehran before returning to England at the end of February 1897. She paid her second visit to Iran some ten years later when she stayed with her brother in Mashad.

Ella shared her brother's interest in and affection for Iran and its people. This is evident in her three books about the country. In, *Through Persia on a side-saddle* (1898), she vividly describes her first visit, her long horseback travels and life in Kerman where she was probably the first European woman ever seen. The book received favorable reviews as "a very readable narrative" (*The Times*, p. 7) *The Story Book of the Shah* (1901), intended for young readers, recounts some of the legends in the *Shah-nama*. The book is well illustrated



and has decorated chapter headings by her sister Ethel. *Persia and its People* (1910), was written after Ella's visit to Mashad and is a useful, though dated, introduction to the country, with chapters on its history, government, religion, antiquities, flora and fauna, Mashad, etc. Subsequently, she published several articles and lectures including "Persian family life" in the *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* for 1914, where she had been a founder member since 1905 and was twice elected to its council, in 1916 and 1921.

In 1911, wishing to discover what opportunities there might be in Canada for Britain's "surplus" of educated women, she worked there as a home-help for six months. In the spring of 1915, she again accompanied her brother, this time to Chinese Turkestan where for six months he was in charge of the British Consulate-General in Kashgar. Ella did not marry or have children and towards the end of her life gave much time to volunteer work with girls, primarily as honorary secretary of the Girls' Friendly Society in South Kensington. She died at her home in London on 23 March 1939.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works.

Books:

Through Persia on a side-saddle, London, 1898 .

The Story Book of the Shah or Legends of old Persia, London, 1901.

Persia and its People, London, 1910.

A Home-help in Canada, London, 1912.

Through deserts and oases of Central Asia, London, 1920 (with P.M. Sykes).

Articles and lectures:

"Persian folklore," *Folklore* 12, 1901.



“Domestic life in Persia,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 1902.

“Life and travel in Persia,” *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 20, 1904.

“A hundred mile ride in Persia,” *Travel and Exploration*, 1909.

“A talk about Persia and its women,” *National Geographical Magazine* 21, Washington, 1910.

“Persian Family life,” *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 1, 1914.

Biographical sources.

Jonathan Spain, “Sykes, Ella Constance (1863-1939),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004, available by subscription at www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/73441 (accessed on December 15, 2008).

P.M. Sykes, *Ten thousand miles in Persia*, London, 1902.

The Times, 28 April 1898, p. 7.

A. Wynn, *Persia in the Great Game: Sir Percy Sykes: Explorer, Consul, Soldier, Spy*, London, 2004.