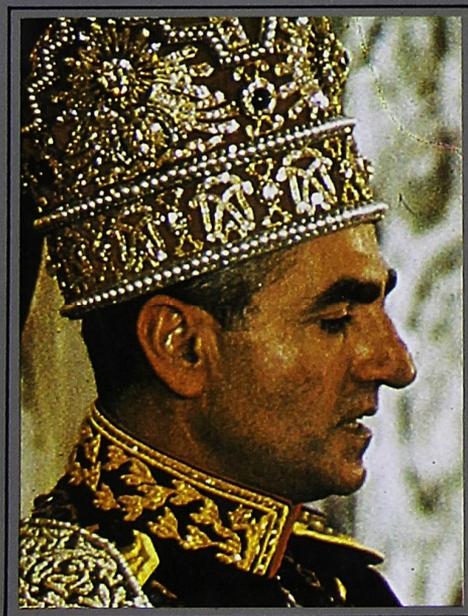


The Pride & the Fall

IRAN 1974-1979

ANTHONY PARSONS



From March 1974 to the end of January 1979, a few days after the Shah and his family flew into exile in Egypt, Sir Anthony Parsons served as British Ambassador to Iran. He witnessed the demise of Pahlavian power from inside the Niavaran Palace (where he was on close terms with the Shah), from his Embassy and from turbulent Tehran streets. This book is the candid, scrupulous accounting of each stage of that decline: of what Parsons reported to Whitehall, of what he said to the Shah and what he personally thought and felt.

'Why did I, with all my experience of the region, fail to see what was about to happen under my eyes?' Parsons asks. His reply is that it was not a lack of information, but a misinterpretation of events, guided by general historical principles rather than by Iran's own past. The Shah had tried to turn Iran into something it had never been – a modern industrial economy. On the crest of the oil boom he ruled with an iron hand, with the loyal support of the armed forces and the back-up of the notorious Secret Service, SAVAK. Then when the boom had failed, leaving a rootless and disgruntled urban proletariat, the Shah chose this worst of moments to lift the political lid with his 'liberalization' measures. Whether or not this move was the result of US pressure, namely Jimmy Carter's human rights campaign (and Parsons isn't convinced that it was), it provided the atmosphere in which the three traditional forces – the mullahs, the intelligentsia and the bazaaris – could unite in opposition. That they would do so in such force is what Parsons, like the Shah, did not foresee until it was too late. Khomeini's ability to mastermind the opposition with such dispatch was a further shock.

From an analysis of Iranian internal policies as he saw them during each year preceding the Revolution, Parsons moves on to an unforgettable record of those last

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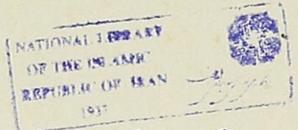
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Anthony Parsons



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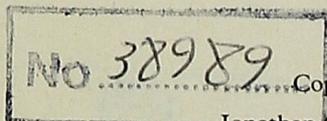
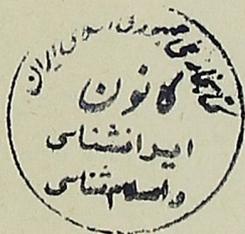
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I dedicate this book to my family, my strongest supporters and sternest critics; especially my wife and younger son for their comments on the first draft, most of which I have incorporated, and my daughter-in-law for undertaking the burdensome task of typing my original manuscript.

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Preface

Princess Paley, unlike my other critics, has rendered me one service for which I am grateful. I have often wondered what was the motive that prompted me to start the Russian Revolution, and she is good enough to tell me.

Sir George Buchanan, *My Mission to Russia*

This book is a personal record. It has no pretensions to scholarship: indeed the dramatic history of Iran in the 1970s is still too close for the scholar's lens to be brought into focus on it. Nor is it a full factual history of Iran in the last years of the Shah, including the revolution. Many such books have already appeared, some written by journalists and quasi-academics, some by those who need, for reasons of self-esteem, to justify themselves and their perception of events - after the events have taken place; some by those who feel compelled for personal or political reasons to place the blame for the collapse of the Shah's regime on outside, exotic forces. My motives are different. First, I have to exorcise the memory of what was without doubt the most absorbing and compelling experience of my diplomatic life - what better way to do this than to set it down on paper? Second, and more important, I want to find the answers to certain questions which have plagued me since I left Tehran towards the end of January 1979, a few days after the Shah and his family had flown away into exile. Could I, as British Ambassador, have been more perceptive in the years before the revolution broke out? Could I have anticipated that the forces of opposition to the Shah - the religious classes, the bazaar, the students - would combine to destroy him, although each of these

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groups was hostile to the regime for a different reason? Could I have known in advance that the combination of these civilian, unarmed, elements would prove too strong for a regime whose power was based on united, well armed, well equipped and loyal armed forces backed by what appeared to be a formidable security apparatus – the dreaded SAVAK? And, if I had been able to see so deep into the heart of Iranian society, would I have advised my government, as well as the British private and public sectors, to adopt different policies – different in all fields including our political and strategic relationship with the Shah, our commercial and financial links with Iran, oil, the sale of military equipment, etc.? And again, if we had adopted different policies across the broad spectrum of our dealings with Iran, would this have lessened the damage to British interests when the collapse came? All these are questions which need to be asked, and I shall do my best to answer them honestly.

I dedicate this book to many people: to my close Iranian friends, notably Amir Abbas Hoveyda, Gholamreza Nikpay and Abbas Ali Khalatbari who went to their deaths with exemplary courage and dignity in the aftermath of the revolution, and to the many others whom I knew personally who faced the firing squads: to my valued Iranian friends now living in exile with whom I have had so many discussions of the events through which we lived together: and lastly to all those Iranians who remain convinced that Britain and America, or perhaps America and Britain, plotted and brought about the downfall of the Shah and the installation of Ayatollah Khomeini as his replacement. 'I mourn for the tragedy of my country,' wrote an Iranian lady to me in 1979, 'but the great powers wished it so, and what could we do?' How many times did the Shah say to me in the closing months 'The people are saying that, if you lift up Khomeini's beard, you will find MADE IN ENGLAND written under his chin.' For all his disclaimers, he clearly was disposed to believe this folklore himself. On the day I left Tehran for good, a middle-aged Iranian, educated in Britain, and long married to an Englishwoman, went so far as to suggest to a member of my staff that the country would have peace if only the Americans would behave like sportsmen and admit defeat at the hands of Bri-

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tain. According to this gentleman, we had never forgiven the United States for breaking our oil monopoly in Iran in the early 1950s. We had patiently bided our time – for a quarter of a century – and had at last seen our way clear to strike. Naturally we had made use of the mullahs, the traditional agents of the British, to bring down the Shah, latterly the creature of the United States. We had won: the Shah had gone, and our man, Khomeini, was on his way back. My counsellor asked whether it would be any use his suggesting that this theory was utter nonsense. ‘But of course you have to say that. I know. I was educated in your country and am married to an English lady. You cannot deceive me.’

I fear that these numerous Iranians, that is to say those who accept this conventional Iranian wisdom as gospel, will find my narrative disappointing. It contains no revelations of sinister machinations against the Shah and his government, of secret plotting between myself and the ayatollahs of Qom and Mashhad. Nor do I explain why Britain should have adopted a policy so destructive of our national interest. Those flattering believers in the omnipresence of the British hidden hand will find my story naive and unconvincing. I hope that they will at least give me credit for taking so much trouble, even in my retirement, to throw more dust in their eyes.