Obituary

Iraj Afshar
1925–2011

Iraj Afshar was one of the most remarkable scholars that Iran has produced in the twentieth century. For over sixty years he was at the heart of the world of scholarly activity and publishing in Tehran. He is widely credited with giving a different emphasis to what is now generally called ‘Transhistoriography’ establishing it securely in the academic and cultural framework of Iranian life. Over a period of four decades he was the editor and inspiration for three important journals and several scholarly series. As head of one of the major libraries in Tehran he introduced the new fields of bibliographical studies and library science. In a long life of active scholarship he produced an altogether quite extraordinary number of books, editions, catalogues and articles across the whole range of Iranian studies in the Islamic period. No other Iranian scholar has so dominated his chosen field and left such a body of work that will be admired for years to come.

His father, Dr Mahmud Afshar, the son of a wealthy Yazdi merchant family, had been educated in Bombay and then Europe, where as a young man during the First World War he had become friends with several of the nationalist leaders, scholars and writers, in exile after the failure of the Constitutional Revolution. After the completion of a doctorate at Lausanne University, he returned to Tehran and in 1925 established the important cultural and political journal Ayanda, which reflected the ideas and aspirations of the reform-minded nationalists of the 1920s. It was the same year in which his eldest child Iraj was born, a few weeks before the dynastic change from the Qajars to the Pahlavis. It was in this literary, political and intellectual milieu that the young Iraj Afshar grew up. Through his father he met some of the most interesting personalities of the cultural and political elite of the Pahlavi period, including Dr Mosaddeq, Seyed Hasan Taqizadeh and Allahyar Salkh, and he had ready access to the leading scholars of the older generation, amongst whom were a number of impressive historians and literary scholars, including Mohammad Qazvini, Ebrahim Purdavud, Saida Nafisi, Mohammad ‘Ali Jamalzadeh and ‘Abbas Ehsan Ashtiyani.
Apart from a few months spent in Yazd where he was taken shortly after the Allied military intervention in Iran in 1941 and the imminent threat of famine in the capital, all Iraj Afshar’s education was in Tehran. After attending a Zoroastrian primary school and then the prestigious Fitzc Bahram secondary school, Iraj Afshar studied for a BA in Law at Tehran University, writing his thesis on the minorities in Iran. In the last years of the war there was no question of his continuing his education abroad as his father had done before the war. Instead he briefly embarked on a career in law, and then he taught in two of the capital’s best secondary schools, Sharaf and Qaraf (Iranshahr), but it was soon clear that his interests and abilities lay elsewhere. Simultaneously with his academic studies, whilst still not twenty years old he began to be closely involved with Ayandokh, which had been briefly revived again by his father in 1944. This led to successive short attachments to a number of years to several other leading literary publications, including Bahâr-e-naw, Milêr and Sîhân, until he himself, with the collaboration of Ehsan Yarshater, started his own general cultural and literary periodical, Râhnamâ-yi Kitâb, which he edited for twenty-one years from 1958 to 1979. Earlier in 1942 he had, with four other colleagues, founded Farhang-e-Irânzâni, a scholarly publication which in thirty volumes during a period of over fifty years published many important texts and articles devoted to Persianian history and classical literature. Editing and publishing cultural and scholarly periodicals and series remained one of the three main elements of his work for the rest of his life.

The second was his own scholarly research. From his earliest association with this world of scholarship and letters in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, he had begun to publish the results of his own research over a wide range of topics. His first publication was a letter about an unknown Ilkhanid medical text in a leading historical journal, Yâdgar, edited by one of his father’s friends, Ahmad Eqlîb Ashtiyani, who perhaps more than anyone else served as a model and mentor in his scholarly and editorial work. More detailed articles quickly followed on a variety of topics that illustrate the broad catholicity of his interests—from the Persian translation of Molière’s The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan, new material about the rebel bandit Nâ’îb Husain Kashani in the disturbed years of the First World War, notes on the historical geography of Yazd and the short-sighted farangûmâna of a telegram official in the 1870s. It was a pattern of publication and an approach that continued for the next sixty years or more. A new source was briefly introduced and annotated, its significance commented on, and the text reproduced. In style it adopted the traditional orientalist methodology, in an Iranian context pioneered by Qazvin and Ashtiyani, but followed by the young Iraj Afshar with a vigour and enthusiasm that was unprecedented. Within a year or two he was editing major texts across the broad range of Persian medieval and early modern history and literature.

In all this activity, Iraj Afshar had not moved beyond the parameters set by his immediate predecessors, except perhaps in the prodigious energy and the almost military discipline he brought to the task of editing, publishing and research. But it was the third interest that gave a focus to all these scholarly and literary activities and provided the framework within which he would be able to transform the field of Irânsâni. Unfitted as a lawyer and a secondary school teacher, through the help of one of his University teachers, Mohsen Saba, in 1951 he was appointed a librarian in the Law Faculty Library at Tehran University, where his colleague was a cataloguer of remarkable erudition, Mohammad Taqi Daneshpazhuhi, with whom he formed a friendship and a formidable partnership that would last the rest of their lives. During this period, the young Afshar deepened his knowledge of Persian literary cataloguing and Irânsâni, and also spent a year at UNESCO in Paris on a library training scheme. It was an opportunity to learn about the latest developments in library science, deepen his acquaintance with the work of European orientalists, as well as improve his knowledge of those European languages which he had already begun to study in his spare time in Tehran.

After nine years the Law Faculty library, he moved briefly to be head of the library at the Teachers’ Training College, but stayed no more than a few months before being appointed at the very young age of thirty-seven to a major post, the headship of the National Library of Iran. But within a short period he was back at Tehran University at the centre for bibliographical research and as head of the University Publications. Two years later, with the strong support of Jahannam Saleh, the Chancellor of Tehran University, he was appointed head of the Central Library. From this powerful and influential position, which he held from 1965 to 1979, he set about reinvigorating the subject of Irânsâni and modernising the study of library science and bibliography at Tehran University, teaching in the different faculties of Social Studies and the Humanities, establishing a succession of publications devoted to information about current books, manuscript catalogues, library science, Iranian Studies, texts and monograph series, collections of photographs and microfilm holdings. A central thread of his work had always been cataloguing manuscripts and compiling indispensable bibliographic studies, such as the seven-volume index to Persian articles, Fasciculus-I slavicus farsi, as well as building up an archive and documentary centre. In addition to this, he initiated conferences and courses on Irânsâni, and promoted a much stronger relationship with centres of Iranian Studies abroad, in Japan and the Subcontinent, besides Europe and America. It was a period of remarkable activity that made the Central Library one of the best administered, up-to-date and enterprising libraries in the Middle East.

At the time of the Revolution of 1979, Iraj Afshar resigned from his position as head of the Central Library, but unlike many scholars whose professional and personal lives were disrupted at this time, he was able to redirect his energies in other ways that continued the work that had provided the main impetus of his life. Râhnamâ-yi Kitâb reappeared under the name of Ayandokh, the periodicity that his father had founded in 1925 and which had burst briefly into life again in the mid-1940s and mid-1950s. Perhaps even more than in the later Pahlavi period, it fulfilled an important role as a forum for objective scholarly discussion in the lean years after the Revolution and during the Iran-Iraq war. Relieved of administrative burdens, Iraj Afshar was able to devote his time to his own scholarly activities and to the private cultural trusts and organisations with which he had always been involved, most notably that founded by his father and called the Manâfi‘-i-ir Dr. Mahmûd Afshâr. He transformed its Studia Persica series (Nâmâvâreb), now twenty volumes of scholarly articles and novels, and he added four similar volumes of the Dafzar-I Târîh, as well as overseeing all its other cultural activities.

But above all in these three decades after the Revolution, he concentrated on his own scholarly interests. These had from his early twenties onwards been extremely diverse and his publications extraordinarily prolific. In the subsequent sixty years the pace never slackened, indeed in number and size of the projects and the speed of completion they only seemed to increase. It is hardly possible to convey the range of his output on almost every aspect of Persian culture. In 1999 his sons produced a bibliography, published in Los Angeles, of all his books and articles, catalogues, editions, reviews, series and miscellanea. The books numbered 271 titles and the articles more than 2000, and in 2004 a supplement was published with another thirteen pages of recent additions. Since then it has been estimated that the total number of books exceeds 300, and at the time of his death five were in press and many more awaiting his final proof-reading, the proofs of some of them by his hospital bedside during his last illness.

As with the first works he published, his dominant interest over these six decades had been the editing of literary texts and historical sources of all kinds, embracing all periods from the earliest Islam to the 1950s. Amongst all these, the first printed edition of Iskandar Mumtaz’s great history of Shah ‘Abbas I’s reign with indices, Târîh-i ‘alam-arâ-yi ‘abbâsî, published when he was still not thirty, set a pattern that over the years was followed by a long list of editions of invaluable dynastic and local histories, correspondence, diaries and memoirs, of which might be mentioned Tîmtime al-Saltana’s private journal from the 1880s and early 1890s, the six volumes of Mustawhir al-Dawla Sâîd’s memoirs and documents, the ten volumes of Tajzadeh’s articles and also his autobiography, Zâdegî-yi tâfûnî, the ten volumes of Mohammad Qazvinizadeh’s Yâdâkhâne-hâ, the ten volumes of the diary of ‘Ayn al-Saltana, and other similarly ambitious projects left unfinished at this death. But it was not just the major texts and the life of the élite that caught Iraj Afshar’s interest. He was one of the first Iranian historians who understood the need to publish the raw material of history that captured the lives and feelings of different strata of society—the private letters, legal disputes, travels and adventures of ordinary people, their wills, household accounts, and the commercial correspondence of merchants, such as the later nineteenth-century entrepreneur Amin al-Zahr, which was produced in collaboration with Dr Asghar Mahdavi. Essential to all this activity was his ability to win the confidence of the owners of often unique personal archives. A reputation for trustworthiness, scrupulous honesty and exactitude in transcribing the text, together with his family’s long connection with leading personalities across the political spectrum and his own standing amongst the Pahlavi élite and a wider public, persuaded them to entrust their memoirs and family papers to him.

If the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries were perhaps the fields in which he worked most, there was the same catholic interest in all of Iran’s culture and the same desire to rescue its literary and historical record
and make it part of the national heritage. From local histories and geographies, especially of his own ancestral town of Yazd, to dialects, long-neglected poets, to the immortals of classical Persian poetry, Ferdowsi and Hafiz, to areas often thought to be outside the range of the scholar’s professional interest, such as cookery, photography, costume, folk-songs, handicrafts and fine arts, book-selling, and the interpretation of dreams, nothing was beyond the reach of his curiosity. In ways that differed from those of his predecessors, he realised from early in his career the urgent task of preserving the past, not just its literary records, and the written word in all its forms from laundry lists to lyric poetry, but also the physical remains left unrecorded and neglected in towns and villages, mountains and deserts the length and breadth of the country, all collected and documented with the purpose of using this new material to enrich and rewrite Iran’s history.

From a younger generation trained in the social sciences or more theoretically-based departments of history in Western universities, there was at times muted criticism of this relentless publication of primary material unaccompanied by any detailed analysis or attempt to set it in a wider context. Despite the extraordinary range of Iraj Afshar’s knowledge, there was a certain modesty that made him refrain from the sweeping generalisation that other less meticulous scholars found it easy to make. Yet he was acutely aware of the need for a different, more sociological approach to the writing of history and on those occasions when he did stand back from the abundance of all the material he had at his command, he would give a wonderfully concise and perceptive survey of the main developments and challenges of a particular field, as in the two “toors d’horizon” on Persian historiography in the twentieth century, his coup d’ceil over Qajar travellers, on essential sources for the Safavids, the magisterial survey of primary sources for the Qajars, and of the reasons why Constitutional government failed. No-one had a sharper eye for a dubious attribution, as demonstrated in his demolition of the claims for the letters said to have been exchanged between Ayatollah Kashani and Dr Mosaddeq on 27 Mordad 1332 (18 August 1953), in which it is alleged that warning was given to Mosaddeq of the impending coup, or the doubts he raised in a forensic analysis of Taj al-Saltañeh’s memoirs.

An innate caution and prudence lay at the root of his reluctance to court controversy and confront the key political issues of the day and comment on their historical dimensions. He had grown up in the last oppressive period of Reza Shah’s rule, in a household in touch with reformist, opposition thinkers and activists. He had seen in the post-1941 period the dangers of political involvement and he had witnessed at first hand the impact of the coup of 1953, in the aftermath of which one of his closest friends, Mortezah Keyvan, was executed for his left-wing views. The lesson he drew from these experiences was that if an independent scholarly periodical was to survive it would have to be completely apolitical. He recalled only one occasion when he departed from this resolve. In January 1962 a unit of commandos attacked students on the Tehran University campus. The following issue of Râhnamâ-yi Kitâb had a black stripe on the cover, on which was written “Râhnamâ-yi sîyah dar hamardari bâ Dânishâbâd” (Black in sympathy with the University). He immediately regretted this rashness, but fortunately there were no repercussions. Thereafter he successfully steered a cautious line that enabled him to move from one régime to its successor, though eventually after fifteen years the difficulties in maintaining an independent stance under the Islamic Republic proved too much and he brought the long run of Ayanda to an end in 1994. But there was never any question of his leaving Iran. He believed that “ghurarhat badar az ‘adam-i istâdik” (“exit is worse than the absence of freedom”), trusting that his personal reputation was such that as long as prudence was observed his own position would be safe, though that did not entirely protect him from personal attacks in the media.

Iraj Afshar had always realised that cooperation between the different centres of Iranian Studies abroad and within the country could only be mutually beneficial. In the years of his greatest institutional influence in the 1960s and 1970s, he had promoted close relationships through frequent foreign travel, organising international conferences in Iran, joint cataloguing projects, and membership of academic bodies abroad. In the often difficult atmosphere after the Revolution he maintained these contacts as best he could at a personal level, participating in the Societas Iranologica Europaea and other international conferences and seminars, and as an energetic member of the board of experts of the al-Farqan Foundation in London. He was always ready to advise young scholars from the West, serving as a bridge between the increasingly divergent worlds of Iranian studies. Through his regular articles called "Tâzahâ va pârâdahâ-yi ‘Irânshînâti" in the periodicals Kîrîk and Bûlûhârî, in some ways modelled on Râhnamâ-yi Kitâb and Ayanda, he kept scholars in Iran in touch with what was happening in the field from Japan to Los Angeles. Likewise through his travels abroad and an extensive network of correspondents to whom he dispatched short, matter-of-fact letters and faxes, often enlivened with a dry, self-deprecating sense of humour, he told them what developments were taking place within Iran. It hardly seemed credible that a single individual could have accomplished so much. It was more than the lifetime’s achievement of several dedicated, hard-working scholars. But right up to a month or two of his death, the energy seemed undiminished, the memory as sharp as ever, the spirit indomitable. Despite personal tragedy in recent years—the loss of his beloved wife and life-long companion, the sudden death of a much-loved eldest son Babak—he continued to work at the same unrelenting pace, finding time for all his many activities at home and abroad, a testimony to an astonishing Yazdi work ethic. In Tehran he occupied a unique position as the doyen of Iranian studies, to whom younger scholars within Iran and from abroad never turned for advice without receiving the latest bibliographical information and precise, practical instructions of how to approach their research. It was wholly in character that he donated his personal library of some 20,000 books, together with a vast collection of documents, photographs and thousands of letters, to the Great Islamic Encyclopaedia in Tehran, the research institute with which he had enjoyed a close association in his last years. In the Islamic Republic it was the organisation that perhaps came nearest to the ideals of objective, serious scholarship that he had worked for all his life.

Underlying this extraordinary dedication to scholarship was a deep patriotism, a fierce pride in the achievements of Persian culture, its literary and artistic heritage, its people and language, landscape and social customs. ‘Irânshînâti for him was ‘Aytunshînâti, to which Iranians inevitably brought their own special perspective. No-one had travelled so extensively throughout Iran, knew its towns, villages and remotest areas so intimately. From his youth until his last year, his chief recreation had been to explore the farthest corners of Irânshînâti with one or two close companions, travels recently collected together in an absorbing volume, Safarnâmeh-ye Galâghar dar ‘Aytun. On a visit to Oxford two or three years ago, he almost gasped with astonishment at seeing the lush beauty of Christ Church meadows in the first flush of summer, but then quickly added that a few weeks earlier he had been in a totally empty, barren landscape without a single blade of grass somewhere in Baluchistan and that, he added, had its own singular beauty too. Iran was never far from his thoughts, nor was that earlier generation of scholars who first tried to present Iranian civilisation to a wider world and create a body of work that embodied the highest standards of contemporary scholarship. They could not have found a better successor—‘Irânshînâti, bibliographer, cataloguer, editor, historian, traveller, and mentor to numerous scholars both in Iran and abroad.

John Gurney

Editorial Note

The Volume 22, April and May 2011 issue of Gazesh-e Mîrîs is devoted to Iraj Afshar and his achievement, with contributions from over sixty Iranian scholars, colleagues and friends.