



NANCY LAMBTON

# Ann Katharine Swynford Lambton

## 1912–2008

ANN KATHARINE SWYNFORD LAMBTON was one of the few outstanding scholars of the Persian language and Persian history that Britain has produced since the subject developed within the wider academic discipline of oriental languages in the nineteenth century. Early in her career she established a reputation as the pre-eminent specialist in all matters Persian: language and grammar, history and political thought in the Islamic period, religion, current events and contemporary political analysis were all considered to lie within her expertise. For many both within and outside the scholarly community she was the ultimate authority in all these specialisations. There have been few scholars who have so dominated their field for such a long period. For close on seven decades in an exceptionally long, active life she published her research with single-minded determination, for a quarter of a century she held the senior chair in Persian in British universities, and throughout much of her adult life she was thought to be an informal advisor to politicians, diplomats, and oil company directors. Inevitably in a life that spanned some of the decisive events in Iran's history from the Allied occupation and fall of Reza Shah in 1941, the Azarbaijan crisis in 1946, the coup d'état of 1953, the land reforms of the early 1960s, and the Islamic Revolution of 1979, in all of which she was alleged to have played some part, myths and legends rapidly accumulated about her. Admired by many for her scholarly achievements, demonised by others for her political involvement, fictionalised in the post-revolutionary Iranian press as the eminence grise of British Intelligence, credited with single-handedly breaking up a German espionage operation in the Second World War, and briefly portrayed in a recent English novel—James Buchan's *A*

*Good Place to Die* (London, 1999)—as ‘a tall lady of prodigious beauty, powerful intellect, implacable will and unassailable chastity’, and in another—Aamer Hussein’s *The Cloud Messenger* (London, 2011)—as having secretly married her Iranian lover in Iran and then left him, she remains one of the most enigmatic, controversial, and impressive personalities amongst twentieth-century orientalists.

Part of this mystique comes from her unusual family background. The higher echelons of the English aristocracy have produced few scholars, let alone orientalists. In this respect the Lambtons, direct descendants of the first Earl of Durham, ‘Radical Jack’ of the Great Reform Bill and the Canada Act fame, appeared no different from their peers. An indifference to fashion and convention bordering on disdain, curtness and decisiveness in speech, an inclination to say and do the unexpected, fearlessness combined with physical and moral courage, were some of the qualities attributed to the Lambtons by their contemporaries. In the case of Professor Lambton’s father, the Honourable George Lambton, the fifth son of the second Earl, to this list could be added an extraordinary charm and spectacular good looks that made him one of the most popular figures in late Victorian and Edwardian fashionable society. When Eton, Cambridge and Sandhurst had failed to prepare him for a more conventional profession, he became an outstanding amateur horseman, until a serious fall put an end to his racing career and he turned to training and owning racehorses. Through a partnership with the sixteenth and seventeenth Earls of Derby that lasted forty years, he became one of the most successful trainers and managers of the period, with thirteen Classic winners and a breeding record that established some of the most important thoroughbred pedigree lines in racing history.

In his late forties George Lambton married a society beauty half his age, Cicely Horner, from a Somerset gentry family, the origins of whose wealth and lands can be traced back at least to the mid-sixteenth century and one of Henry VIII’s commissioners for the dissolution of the monasteries, the ‘little Jack Horner’ of the nursery rhyme. In the later nineteenth century the deeply conservative rural life on their estate at Mells was disrupted by the surprising marriage of Cicely’s father, John Horner, to Frances Graham, a metropolitan, cultured socialite from a quite different background. Her father, William Graham, was a Liberal MP, an art collector and patron, especially of the Pre-Raphaelites. Burne-Jones had been infatuated by Frances’s pale beauty; Cicely, her eldest daughter, had inherited her mother’s Pre-Raphaelite looks, and in turn was painted by Burne-Jones and John Singer Sargent. But once she had married George

Lambton she devoted herself to promoting and participating in her husband's career. George Lambton admitted in his autobiography, *Men and Horses that I have known* (London, 1924), that 'with a large stable of horses there is very little time and leisure for other things; your horses occupy your thoughts to the exclusion of everything else, and the man who is not always thinking about them is not usually much good at his job'. From Mesnil Warren, their large Victorian house at Newmarket, 'the Honourable George' and Cicely managed the enterprise with panache and skill.

Born on 8 February 1912, Ann Lambton, called Nancy by her family and friends, was the second of their four children. She had been given her third name, Swynford, after the winner of the St Leger in 1911. Like most Lambtons, she and her siblings were 'born in the saddle and ride by the light of nature', and they enthusiastically followed their father's fortunes. The most celebrated of these was Sansovino's winning the Derby in 1924. Nancy, accompanied by her old nanny, Nurse Pyke, heard the news whilst she was visiting her elder brother John at Eton, and they rushed into the High Street and did a war dance of jubilation, whilst at Mesnil Warren the younger brother Edward and the butler put up Union Jacks and other flags. The next year the *Sporting Chronicle* praised her as an outstanding young rider, combining 'a perfect seat in the saddle with beautiful hands', frequently to be seen riding the stable's thoroughbreds at morning exercise on Newmarket Heath. The journalist added that he had often heard the remark from those who had watched her riding, 'what a pity she's not a boy'. A subsequent serious fall had given her concussion, and grown too tall and heavy to ride her father's racehorses, she was forced to consider what to do in life.

Unlike her two brothers, Nancy had not been sent away to school. Later she liked to exaggerate her lack of formal education, claiming that she had been brought up in a racing stable, though in fact she had attended a day school in Newmarket until she was seventeen, and learned French and German well. Higher education was hardly necessary for the kind of life that her mother had envisaged for her. Her father, deeply admired by Nancy, was absorbed in his own work and remained aloof from the deteriorating relationship between headstrong mother and obstinate daughter. Nancy rebelled against the social conventions that were expected of her. Always something of a tomboy, she took part in whatever sport or exercise was at hand—cycling, climbing, skiing, tennis, hockey, even football. But she also began to read the accounts of the great travellers and adventurers of the period, beginning with T. E. Lawrence's *Revolt in the Desert*, then moving on to Doughty, Palgrave, and Gertrude Bell.

A chance encounter around Christmas 1929 gave greater direction to this reading and changed the course of her life. At Mentmore Towers, the country house of the sixth Earl of Rosebery, a prominent racehorse owner and breeder, she found herself seated at dinner next to Sir Denison Ross, the director of the School of Oriental Studies. He encouraged her to take this interest in oriental travel seriously and suggested that she should visit him in London. Nancy was nearly eighteen, and he introduced her to an entirely different world, one that appealed to her sense of adventure and travel, the challenge of learning difficult languages, and one that held out the prospect of greater independence. It was a route of escape from the parental home and its imposed expectations.

Although she later said with typical self-deprecation that ‘a study of the form book was not perhaps an ideal preparation for an academic career’, she diligently set about obtaining the basic qualifications for admission to the School of Oriental Studies, then at Finsbury Circus. She moved to London, stayed with her widowed grandmother, Frances Horner, then in her mid-seventies and still living part of the year in Mayfair. Nancy studied at a crammer for some months until she could be accepted at the School for a one-year certificate course in Persian in October 1930. Denison Ross guided and encouraged her early progress, much as he had for Freya Stark a decade earlier when, in her memorable description in *Traveller's Prelude* (London, 1950), he ‘would trot in and out like a full moon dancing on the tips of its toes, or perhaps like a benevolent, but not strictly virtuous, Silenus; he would sit at our desks to look at our books—always beside the prettiest scholar, whose hand he liked to hold’.

Tall and handsome, Nancy soon showed she was made of sterner stuff. A second year certificate in Persian was passed in the following year and, having matriculated in June 1932, she enrolled at King's College for an Intermediate Arts course, studying Latin, German and Geology for one year, with Persian taught at the School by Denison Ross and Wolseley Haig, an Indian army officer who had been a consul in Persia during the First World War. The following year she progressed to the two-year honours course in Persian at the School, where Arabic, Linguistics, Phonetics, and comparative Iranian philology were added to the main subjects of Persian language, literature and history. One of the great achievements of Ross had been his ability to attract to the School a group of remarkable scholars, described by a later Director, who had known most of them at first hand, as ‘the biggest single bunch of eccentrics in Europe’. Amongst those who taught Nancy during her undergraduate years were some of the leading names in their fields—Harold Bailey, Vladimir Minorsky,

Henry Dodwell, and above all Hamilton Gibb, the outstanding Arabist and Islamic scholar of his generation.

An important and unexpected early influence came from outside Finsbury Circus, through a friend of the Horners, which helped to placate parental anxieties about the direction Nancy's life was taking. Cicely's first cousin, Olivia Horner, had married the political theorist Ernest Barker, who had been appointed to the new chair of political science at Cambridge in 1927. In their circle of friends was one of the most sympathetic of English orientalist, Guy Le Strange, whose experiences of travelling in the Near East and Persia reached back nearly sixty years. Now nearly eighty and almost blind, he was delighted to help Nancy through some of her Arabic and Persian texts at the beginning of the honours course; he told her that 'you are the most intelligent pupil I have ever had', and he gave her his precious copy of Schefer's edition of Nizam al-Mulk's *Siyasat-nameh*, with Edward Granville Browne's annotations, adding in a note:

Here is good advice which you probably will not take. Don't let Browne's *Siyasat Nameh* go out of your hands. Don't lend it to Minorsky or anyone else. Quote me forbidding you. If you lend it you will never get it back. Say you intend yourself using Browne's collation for a new edition which you intend to bring out.

But the lessons suddenly ended in December 1933 when Le Strange was hit by a bus and died a few days later. Brief as it had been, this relationship had given Nancy a sense of the tradition of orientalist scholarship, a lesson she would later apply to the study of Islamic scholarship and the transmission of learning from one generation to the next.

It needed more than the support of the Horners in Cambridge to persuade Cicely and George Lambton to allow Nancy to do what Le Strange had done over fifty years earlier. Travel had first aroused her interest in the Middle East, and she wanted to spend the summer vacation in Persia before her final examinations. Sir Denison and Lady Ross were invited down to Newmarket, but she had a cold and he a new book to read, and they did not even bother to look at the horses. The next weekend Freya Stark, an old friend of Olivia Horner and suddenly famous in literary London as an intrepid female traveller after the publication of *The Valleys of the Assassins and other Persian Travels* (London, 1934), was asked down to give her support to Nancy's 'desire for Eastern travel and freedom'. But, as described in *Beyond Euphrates* (London, 1951), there was mutual incomprehension. Cicely looked on her 'as an interloper from another sphere and a perverter of her daughter', and Freya Stark found her hostess 'very trying', as she watched 'Mrs Lambton, hard and handsome, leap up

at luncheon to hang over the telephone for the betting on a race in progress, without a remark to her guest during the whole meal'. But these interventions and the support of an increasingly important figure in Nancy's life, Lady Eleanor Lambton, her paternal aunt married to Lord Robert Cecil, were eventually successful. The award of the Ouseley Memorial Prize gave her a small measure of financial independence. Despite an illness that forced her to miss much of the summer term in her penultimate year, she left for Persia in early July 1934.

Although this first brief visit of a little over two months did not produce the excitement on discovering a new culture and people that some young travellers to Persia describe, it did suggest those aspects of Persian life which would hold her interest and affection in the future. At Isfahan she lived with missionaries in the Christian hospital compound for two months, spending most of her time with the small expatriate community, playing tennis, some polo, riding most days, cycling, and above all climbing. She had some Persian lessons, and made friends with a few Persians, particularly a young Bakhtiyari family, but it was in the mountains around Isfahan where she enjoyed herself most, frequently climbing up into the Kuh-e Soffeh range to the south of the town, and on one occasion a more distant peak, where 'a slight adventure' forced her to spend the night on the mountain without enough food or warm clothing. This was the Persia that attracted her from this very first experience, the jagged outline of distant limestone mountains, the soft yellow and greenish blue light just before sunrise or after sunset. She also was quick to respond to what she then called 'the poorer classes', like the groom's family, 'hospitable, pleasant, dignified, unassuming people'.

Lost ground made up by the teaching she had had in Isfahan on language and the set texts, her health restored, she was well prepared for the final year at the School. The same gifted group of teachers taught her Persian and Arabic, with the difference that now Hamilton Gibb played a more active part, in both Arabic classes and lectures on Islamic Institutions, and he began to take an interest in her progress. Despite this, Nancy was only awarded an upper second in her final examinations in 1935. It was a disappointment that probably had a damaging long-term effect, both on her self-confidence and in how she treated some of her own students later. In all the thirty or more years when she was an examiner in Persian at the School, or indeed everywhere else, no one was ever awarded a first class mark in Persian. Otherwise, Finsbury Circus had provided a congenial atmosphere where she worked in the splendid Regency reading room and library on the first floor, and relaxed playing table tennis in the basement.

As a break from a schedule of up to twelve lectures and classes a week and a lot of close textual preparation, at lunch times she sometimes roller-skated round the oval gardens in front of the fine colonnaded entrance.

With the School some way from the central colleges of London University in Bloomsbury and the Strand, and staying with her Horner grandmother in Mayfair, it was hardly the typical undergraduate experience. But her Cecil relatives more than compensated for this. Once she had graduated, Nancy moved to live with her aunt and uncle at South Eaton Place in Belgravia. Lord Robert Cecil and Nelly were the antithesis of her own parents. Brought up at Hatfield, the third son of the prime minister, Lord Salisbury, politics were in Robert Cecil's bloodstream, but the course of his political career had been quite unconventional, moving between parties and a variety of important offices. Now in his sixties, he was too much of a maverick to be allied to any party, and much of his time and energy was devoted to the work of the League of Nations, of which he had been an early supporter. On all sides he was regarded as a man of utter integrity and high ideals, and he had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. There still gathered around him a handful of enthusiasts for the League's principles, including rising political figures on the left. Through these contacts Nancy was introduced to a range of different ideas, where the discussion was of the great issues of the day—the rise of Fascism, Appeasement, and the Spanish civil war.

This was not the only contrast with Mesnil Warren. Nelly Cecil was a person of great charm and intelligence, affectionate, unpretentious and amusing. She was described by her nephew David Cecil, in *The Cecils of Hatfield House* (London, 1973), as being exquisitely pretty, with small fine features and large dark eyes, combining 'sharp, strong, witty intelligence with a delicate artistic and literary sensibility'. Her friend Virginia Woolf called her 'honest, humble, shabby, distinguished', and claimed that 'the only people she likes are writers; her own friends she despises a little'. The Cecils had had no children, a much loved Cecil nephew had died in the war, and Nancy in time came to fill that void. At the turn of the century they had built a modest country house at Chelwood Gate on Ashdown Forest. In later years and with increasing deafness, they spent more time there, a private enclave in which Nancy was included and for whom it became a second home. Robert Cecil's individualism, an autocratic conviction in his own judgement, and a high-minded belief that with privilege went a duty to serve the community, all had some impact on his young niece. Already a straightforward, unsentimental, immovable Christian



faith was the bedrock of her life, as it had always been for Robert and Nelly Cecil.

A mentor of a very different kind at the School of Oriental Studies shaped Nancy's scholarly development. Hamilton Gibb, the Professor of Arabic, came from a Scottish Presbyterian background. An austere scholar but with a wide range of interests and gifts, it was his lectures on Islamic Institutions during her final year as an undergraduate that had made such an impression on Nancy and determined her to register as a doctoral student. The subject that she chose was 'The social organization of Persia under the early Saljuqs', with Denison Ross nominally as her supervisor, though in practice Gibb was more directly involved. Gibb had also encouraged a more immediate project on Islamic craft guilds, which it was thought that she should have at hand to work on during the two terms of leave in Persia that the award of the Agha Khan Travelling Scholarship in 1936 had made possible. Nancy also wanted to use this opportunity to perfect her Persian, stressing in a letter in Persian to the Iranian minister in London, asking for introductions, that she did not want to mix with the official classes, only with ordinary people who spoke straightforward, unadorned Persian, uncontaminated by foreign influences.

In contrast to the previous visit, this time she had a clear idea of what she wanted to accomplish. At Isfahan, where she stayed for the first few months in the same missionary environment, she quickly resumed the earlier contacts with the expatriate community of missionaries, representatives of the Imperial Bank of Persia and the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), and the few Persian families she had come to know. But now that she had a well-defined project, it was easier to approach Persians beyond the limited circles of those connected with foreigners. The most useful was the governor of Isfahan, Sur Esrafil (Mirza Qasem Khan), one of the few Persians whom she had enjoyed talking to on the previous visit, a highly educated intellectual who had played a significant part in the Constitutional Revolution thirty years earlier. He had not been successful in finding accommodation for her in a Persian family but he did recommend a learned teacher, Hosein 'Ali Rashed, with whom she studied Arabic grammar and read some Persian poetry, an experience that she confessed had for the first time taught her how to appreciate poetry 'when explained by someone who really understands it'. The governor's intervention had also helped when she was questioned by the police on the pretext of her not wearing stockings, though in fact it was because she had aroused their suspicion for asking questions about such an apparently innocent topic as the guilds. With the governor's approval it was easier to pursue her

research and travel outside Isfahan, and he allowed her to sit in his office and watch the way the business of government was transacted and disputes resolved. It was an ambience she enjoyed, 'a delightful blend of East and West in his office', where she could listen to a discussion on Arabic poetry, on European politics and the League of Nations, and be given suggestions about whom in Isfahan she should consult on the earlier history of the guilds. Nancy felt that she was beginning to make a breakthrough in her understanding of the structures of Persian urban life.

But the most important and lasting friendship from this period came about in a different way. With the thorough grounding in linguistics taught at the School, it was almost expected for a young orientalist to do some work on dialects. By chance there was a young woman patient in the Christian Mission Hospital who came from an area north of Isfahan, on the borders of the province of Kashan, where dialects were spoken that belonged to a sub-group from the wider linguistic family of central Iran (ancient Media). Nancy learned that at a secondary school in Isfahan there were two young brothers who came from the same cluster of villages, and they were prepared to teach her the dialect they spoke between themselves. When the patient had recovered and returned home, Nancy accompanied her and stayed some days with her family and with relatives of the two Haidari brothers nearby in Jawshaqan. It was the first excursion she had made beyond the immediate vicinity of Isfahan and the beginning of an attachment to the Persian countryside, its people, customs and practices, that lasted a lifetime. Immediately she had liked the genuine friendliness, simplicity, natural courtesy and dignity of the three families there. Later that summer she spent some weeks living with them *en famille*, joining in the household chores of churning butter, making yoghurt, and milking the goats, sleeping in the tents in the high grazing pastures, walking and climbing in the magnificent mountain range above Jawshaqan. Sometimes it could be immensely frustrating; she disliked the absence of any privacy, and the frittering away of time. She wanted to be active and energetic, and found it difficult to convince her hosts that she liked walking for its own sake, and was quite capable of out-walking and out-climbing any of the men folk. But in the course of these weeks in the summer of 1936 the basis had been laid for her extraordinary knowledge and understanding of *Iran profonde*, and these villages in the mountains south of Kashan became a kind of spiritual home to which she was drawn back time and again over the next thirty years.

Once the possible sources of information on guilds in Isfahan had been exhausted, Nancy moved to Tehran. By now she had gathered an

impressive clutch of letters of introduction to Persians who might be able to help her. As soon as she arrived in Tehran in early September she began to follow them up, and they gave her immediate access to several among the cultural and scholarly élite that otherwise it would have been difficult for foreigners to reach. Amongst these was Mohammad 'Ali Foroughi, who had been prime minister a few years earlier and Iran's representative at the League of Nations in Geneva where he had come to know Lord Robert Cecil; he was now living in semi-retirement, reading and writing on philosophical subjects. Another was 'Ali Akbar Dehkhoda, a major figure from the Constitutional Revolution and an outstanding political satirist, now compiling his great dictionary and aloof from all political activity. The Dehkhoda family were so impressed with her that they wanted Nancy to stay with them, but anxiety about the police prevented that. Arabic lessons were continued with a deeply learned traditional scholar, Mohammad Hosein Fazel Tuni, who invited her to come to his house after the police had stopped him from going to where she was staying. With all these she became friends, but in general Tehran society did not make any deep impression on her. Over the course of a few months she had met an interesting cross-section of the cultural and scholarly élite across the generations, including poets and writers, scholars, educationalists and teachers, as well as politicians and others from a generation whose period of political importance dated back to the pre-Pahlavi years. Through these she collected information about guilds and whom to consult for more, but even with those whom she liked there was the occasional exasperation expressed in the privacy of her notebooks, impatience with different customs and behaviour, criticism of what she called the Persian mind and its inability to think logically or to synthesise. It was the first sign of a prejudice that grew more marked as the years passed, a certain disdain for the westernised, metropolitan Persian, in contrast to the affinity she had from the beginning felt for rural life.

Outside these kinds of contact and her work on the guilds and a little on dialects, most of Nancy's time was spent with the small expatriate community, especially the AIOC representatives in whose houses she stayed. It was with them that she explored the Alborz mountains, and she found their company much more congenial than that of the diplomats. It was most likely as a result of these friendships that after nine months she asked permission from the School to stay on for another term, until the spring of 1937. It gave her the opportunity to travel to some of the major provincial centres and collect more material about guilds. In all these travels, as well as at Isfahan and Tehran, there seemed an almost deliber-

ate attempt to suppress any overt enthusiasm about the people she met or the places she visited, other than the mountains and countryside. Persepolis ('suppose it is wonderful but was not greatly impressed by it'), the tombs of Hafez and Sa'di in Shiraz ('neither tomb I thought very impressive or beautiful'), and the Golestan palace in Tehran ('didn't care for any things in the palace much') were all swiftly dismissed; nowhere, except the Gauharshad Mosque in Mashad and the Shah 'Abbas Mosque in Isfahan, measured up to expectations. Yet, despite this reserve, even deliberate aloofness, an enormous amount had been achieved in this year. The extraordinary efficiency and determination with which she set about her research on the guilds, the wide range of the Tehran cultural and scholarly élite she was able to meet, the warmth, even affection, of some of their subsequent correspondence with her, all testify to an engagement and an attraction that she did not want to admit even to herself. She had been exceptionally fortunate in those Persians who helped her. She could not have been given a better introduction, and with a natural courtesy and sense of decorum that appealed to Persian sensibilities, she made the most of these unusual opportunities.

As soon as Nancy rejoined the School, in addition to the formal supervisions and some Persian classes with the veteran politician and scholar, Sayyed Hasan Taqizadeh, she decided to publish two self-contained pieces of research that derived directly from the year in Persia. The first was a slight study, *Three Persian Dialects* (London, 1938), the first two of which were those dialects she had worked on in Isfahan and during her visits to the Jawshaqan area, and the third was the result of a few days spent in the mountains north of Tehran. The second publication also was firmly fixed within the orientalist tradition in which she had been trained. Whilst in Isfahan, through the governor Sur Esrafil, she had been shown a copy of the sixteenth-century document that gave an account of the division of the waters of the Zayandeh Rud, the great river that supplied the basin of Isfahan with water. With the help of a retired head of the water supply in Isfahan, she had it copied, and then she translated the Persian text, together with the statistics which were written in a highly specialised method of notation. A much shortened version was quickly published in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*, 9 (1938). In both studies, there was an impressive command of a difficult vocabulary, an understanding of agricultural techniques and practices, a feeling for the topography of the physical landscape, and an ability to translate or summarise recondite material in clear, straightforward prose, solid virtues that characterised all her subsequent work.

However, the main focus after her return was to finish the thesis. Little work had been done on it whilst she had been in Persia. She did spend a few days in libraries in Tehran, Tabriz and Mashad, but this was for work on the guilds, not specifically on the subject of her dissertation. Originally it is likely that the study of guilds was conceived as a part of the thesis, but much of Nancy's information came from interviews and at most these recollections went back only as far as the turn of the century. The material relating to the Saljuq period was limited. As a result, the research on guilds was treated separately. Shortly after her return the notes were typed up and given the title 'The Islamic Craft Guild, with special reference to Persia'. Over the years marginal notes and additions were made to the original typescript, even as late as forty years afterwards, but it was never published. The thesis on the Saljuqs, completed in a little over two years after returning from Persia, also remained unpublished. A late change in the title to 'Contributions to the study of Saljuq Institutions', and a sensible redefinition of the period and its geographical limits, gave it greater cohesion. It was submitted in June 1939, and the examiners, Hamilton Gibb, Denison Ross and Reuben Levy, all orientalist brought up in a similar tradition, presented no difficulties. There were no immediate plans to publish it as Nancy wanted to work further on the topic, but many years later she was at least able to draw on its invaluable material for several published articles.

The nine years of study and examinations had been successfully concluded, but there was apprehension about the future as well as some dissatisfaction with the immediate past. It was not clear what Nancy should do next or for what her long training had prepared her. There was no prospect of a position in Islamic history, and there were several people already teaching Persian at the School. She decided to return to Persia and do more research there, at least for a short period. Harold Bailey had encouraged her to work on dialects and there were other topics that interested her, besides the Saljuqs. Out of sorts and anxious about what the immediate future might hold, shortly after the thesis viva was over she set off, travelling by train through Europe and Russia down to Baku and across the Caspian to Tehran. There is also the possibility that she was drawn back by an *amitié amoureuse*, the details of which are hard to piece together. Whatever it was, it caused her considerable personal unhappiness. On the way out she confessed that she 'did not feel any of the old excitement or lure of the mountains'. Even a trek through the mountains from Qum to Jawshaqan and two weeks spent there with the Haidari family did not help. She felt 'the old no longer pleased and the new did not

seem possible or indeed attract much'. It was only once she began to work again that her mood improved. In Tehran she discussed research plans with Persian friends, particularly Forughī and Dehkhoda, and set about arranging interviews for a study of local government of forty years earlier, as well as looking at Saljuq sources. About the former topic she asked Forughī's advice, anxious that it would not be thought too politically suspect, to which he sensibly replied that whatever she did suspicions would be raised. But now in early September 1939 her life suddenly changed. Immediately war had been declared the British minister enlisted her to work in the press and publicity section of the Legation. It was completely unexpected and had a momentous impact on her subsequent career.

For the next six years, throughout the whole of the war apart from one short leave, Nancy played a central role in the official British presence in Iran. At first it had not been easy. Some of her relatives wanted her to return, though not Robert Cecil who wrote that all his life he had campaigned for women to be in the Foreign Service and now she had achieved this entirely by herself, the first woman appointed to a post abroad. Nancy justified it with typical matter-of-fact common sense:

I have a job which somebody must do . . . Trivial, or what appears trivial, things have to be done by someone or other. I am lucky enough to have been offered a job in which I can make use to some extent of my specialized knowledge (such as it is). Given that the job has to be done, it seems to me that I am at present at least of more use here than elsewhere. This sounds like self-justification (perhaps it is) or grumbling, which it is not meant to be; on the whole I am happy here.

During her previous stay in Tehran, she had not liked what she had seen of diplomats and the diplomatic life, their concern with status and seniority, the parties, bridge, and formal dinners. She loathed bureaucratic procedures and most of her colleagues, especially the military attaché and the Indian Civil Service representatives—'each one seems to think it is his privilege to be rude to and domineer over those under him', 'stupid, ill-mannered self-seeking petty people', 'wet and tiresome young men'. Even the regular Foreign Office diplomats were criticised for their jealousy of other departments and 'old school tie'ishness'. In general she thought the Legation 'a mad house', 'a bear garden', 'almost like a detective book, and not a very nice one at that'. And she was just as censorious of the other British expatriates in Tehran too: 'Our colony here is an awful pigheaded collection of old women—won't do a hand's turn.' But, still only in her late twenties, she was accepted on her own terms. She lived by herself, with a housekeeper, renting a small, damp, uncomfortable house with a leaking

roof and no electricity, in an unfashionable part of the town, within easy cycling distance of the Chancery; she dressed as she liked, and avoided parties as much as she could—‘the weekly penance’.

Instead she immersed herself in work, described in a letter to a friend as consisting ‘largely in reading newspapers, supplying material to the press, making reports on public opinion as reflected in the press and elsewhere, establishing contact with as many people as possible and so on—the latter you will observe is a task to which there is no end’. To these would soon be added responsibility for a news commentary in Persian about seven times a month, an English bulletin, another in German, broadcasts and propaganda films. She worked long hours, an example given to Robert Cecil was: ‘Morning, 7–1 office, afternoon roughly 4–7.30 or later, earlier if busy. After that start visits (not for social purposes!) this week as follows: Saturday Norwegians, Sunday Persians, Monday Hungarians, Tuesday Persians, Wednesday Poles, Thursday Persians, Friday Czechs. What a mixture!’ Understaffed and greatly overworked as the international situation deteriorated, there were very few days off, rarely even brief excursions into the Alborz mountains that overshadow Tehran, tantalisingly seen from her dining-room window.

It was this demanding work ethic and commitment to the many tasks entrusted to her as press attaché that commended her to Sir Reader Bullard when he came as minister after a few months. In his mid-fifties, unaccompanied by his wife and children, in a posting which he was surprised to have got and by experience and temperament perhaps was not wholly suited to, he quickly saw how invaluable the services were of a young orientalist who knew the language well and had some knowledge of Persia. A little authoritarian with his staff, for Reader Bullard this granddaughter of an earl at once became a favourite. He insisted that she should be in the Legation party when he presented his credentials at court, an audience made famous for Reza Shah’s consternation at seeing Nancy dressed up in academic robes, with a hood ‘of the wrong university, the wrong faculty and the wrong colour’ and wearing a man’s mortarboard, which the Shah mistook for a perfidious British attempt to reinstitute the capitulations which he had abolished ten years earlier. On this occasion, Bullard described her in *Letters from Tehran* (London, 1991) as ‘tall—about 5.10 I should think, and normally looks too heavily built, but she has a very attractive, sensitive face, and when dressed for the audience she looked very striking’. She saw in him another mentor, with the qualities of rock-like integrity, plain speaking, and moral courage. He disliked ‘humbug’, hypocrisy, ‘intrigue’, and calculating worldliness. A strong bond of

mutual respect and trust, even affection, was established between them; they had common interests, in the church services at the American Mission Hospital after which she would stay to Sunday lunch, and in discussing Samuel Johnson, Jane Austen, and Dickens.

Nancy's advice had some bearing on one of the most dramatic episodes of these early years of the war in Tehran, the occupation of Iran by the Allied armies and the abdication of Reza Shah. After the German advance on Moscow in June 1941, alarmed at the somewhat exaggerated number of German agents and the potential threat that they posed to the supply routes to Russia overland from the Persian Gulf, the Allies decided to warn Reza Shah to act against them. When this had little effect, Russian and British troops invaded. It was not an action that Nancy could justify. She felt a sense of shame at the invasion itself, the way it had been carried out and its dubious legality:

The behaviour of the Foreign Office has been jesuitical to a degree. No Persian will ever again believe [us] ... and I don't blame them. Actually they probably never have believed us, so practically it won't make such a difference. All the same it does not fill one either with confidence or pride.

But once it had happened and Reza Shah's behaviour became more erratic, Nancy provided the material broadcast by the BBC Persian service during the 'three nights of intensive campaign' that listed examples of Reza Shah's abuses of power. These were directly responsible for his abdication. It was a masterstroke, unexpected and devastating in its consequences: 'Never, I suppose, have the BBC had such a success, for it was almost entirely due to the Persian broadcasts from London that it happened.' Though pleased that Reza Shah had gone, despite the euphoria of the moment she even-handedly commented that 'it would be unjust to deny that he did a tremendous amount for the country, though unfortunately in later years excesses obscured that fact'.

With Persia now brought into the forefront of the war effort, the whole scale of the operation in the Tehran Legation was transformed. Over the next four years from a small staff in a relatively quiet backwater Tehran became the centre of a vital link in a military and intelligence operation that sustained the Russian defence against the Nazi attack and then reinforced the Soviet army's advance on the eastern front. Nancy's own department of press and publicity, responsible ultimately to the Ministry of Information, was greatly expanded. Her duties likewise multiplied to include all kinds of anti-Nazi, pro-Allied propaganda, broadcasting in Persian, dealing with the Persian press, controlling editors and publishers, maintaining



contacts with the Persian Communist party, recruiting young writers and intellectuals on the left to promote the Allied cause, establishing a pro-British group of supporters amongst the parliamentary deputies, and influencing the choice of cabinet positions, even that of prime minister. She was at the interface between the British presence and the Persian political élite; from her office in Victory House, close by the Legation in Ferdawsi Street, she was abreast of most of the important domestic political developments of the time.

Inevitably in wartime the boundaries between this kind of work and intelligence operations were often blurred. Within her department there were undercover members of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), and she knew about some of their activities. She sometimes travelled with them in Persia, visited them in Baghdad and Cairo, and found their company amusing and interesting, but she never worked directly for SOE or other intelligence departments, only for the Ministry of Information and the head of mission in Tehran. Nevertheless, she sometimes felt she was being drawn into activities from which she might find it difficult to extricate herself. Writing to a friend a year after the occupation, she confessed:

There are some queer things going on at the moment. I'm not quite sure if you would altogether approve. I don't know that I do really but things are not uninteresting . . . At times, I fear, I may have got caught up in something it will be difficult to get away from and that I shall not ever return to the peace and quiet of a life spent doing research work—one seldom does return and conditions are often if not usually such as to prevent return. However speculation is useless and one has to live in the present—which here at any rate is not too bad!

Whilst the turnover of the Legation staff at most levels was high, Nancy remained a fixture, apart from a few months in the second half of 1943 when she eventually returned for a short leave to Britain, prolonged by illness which meant she missed the Tehran conference of November 1943. Together with Alan Trott, the long-serving oriental secretary whom she met on her first visit to Tehran in 1934, and his assistant, Lancelot Pyman, she provided vital continuity amongst the Persian specialists in the Legation. Bullard relied on her advice as much as that of anyone else.

It was not long before the myth surrounding her began to take shape. She spoke Persian almost flawlessly, well enough she thought nearly to pass for a Persian in her broadcasts. In Kurdistan she was once reproached for wearing European clothes instead of her own Kurdish dress. Persian newspapers published her articles and accounts of her attending the Parliament:

In the place consigned to foreign spectators was an Englishwoman who smiled also. For a few minutes I forgot the Majles and its deputies and scrutinized the simple dress, the simple toilet, the calm expression and blue [*sic*] eyes, and she struck me as being a frank and noble woman with simple dress, well proportioned, elegant gestures and in her glance a peculiar brilliancy.

Less flattering cartoons appeared in the hostile press, as well as the inevitable accusations that she was a spy who knew more about Persian political life than anyone else, the 'Miss Lambton' of legendary omniscience and subterfuge in contemporary Iranian folklore.

The rough and tumble of political involvement in this period had exposed Nancy to a different side of Tehran life. In the weeks after the occupation, she described how 'the jackals come crowding round', and with them 'a certain class of Persian which wants and believes we run the country and wish to be our slaves'. Much of her working day was spent in dealing with these, in the parliament and in the government, and this closer contact only intensified her earlier view of the Tehran political classes in general. Less vehement in her castigation of these than Bullard, who was contemptuous of almost all Persians to the point that even Churchill commented on it, Nancy drew a distinction between the 'falseness, cowardice, lack of principle and corruption' of those involved in official life, and the 'many real virtues' of the best type of Persian, uncontaminated by office and power. She believed that there were some who genuinely wanted reform and progress, difficult though they were to persuade to take an active role. Her hope was for a relatively progressive regime with the emergence of genuine democratic government, where there would be real political parties and political programmes. There is no doubt of the sincerity of her wish for a root and branch regeneration of society. Her self-mocking reference to the old 'Bolshevik' streak in her was not entirely fanciful; her reputation for radical views in the Legation (and also among her own family) was not without some basis.

These more general ideas and aspirations were also expressed in a series of articles during the war years, published in the *Asiatic Review*, which give a clearer indication about what she thought than the disjointed reflections in her self-censored private correspondence or her official memoranda. Here the criticisms made were that Persians had no conception of the individual, and no capacity for independent thought. In a sweeping condemnation of Persian society, the overall impression given is of a nation damaged by the terror of Reza Shah's reign, where there had been suppression of individual freedom, and corruption had thoroughly

permeated official life. As a result a general degradation of character had spread throughout the whole people, and in the political anarchy after the abdication she saw only cynicism, love of intrigue, and outward show. Where some Iranians look back to the war years and the immediate aftermath as a brief interlude of relative freedom and political experimentation, she saw a further moral decline, a sense of drift, and a tendency towards xenophobia. In her view, lack of initiative and sound judgement, political incapacity and incompetence characterised this period. From the perspective of Victory House there seemed to have been no recognition of the cultural and intellectual ferment that others have attributed to these years and seen as the signs of a re-engagement with the democratic process.

With the end of the war in sight, there was some apprehension about returning to London. She thought that she might be like a 'fish out of water', felt that she knew more people in Tehran than in London, and had despite everything got used to life in Persia. Whilst she contemplated the possibilities in September 1944, A. J. Arberry, the new professor of Persian at SOAS (by now enlarged to include African studies and installed in its new buildings near Russell Square), informed her of a post in Persian and he encouraged her to apply. The application was sent in by Ernest Barker on her behalf, and he had agreed to act as a referee as did Reader Bullard and Harold Bailey; later references came from Gibb and Minorsky, and a cautiously supportive letter from Taqizadeh. In the event she could not be released until the war was over, and her appointment started from October 1945. It was a new post of senior lecturer funded by the AIOC with the purpose of bolstering the Persian teaching generally at SOAS and providing short-term courses for its personnel, which would also be useful for diplomats, the military, British Council representatives and businessmen. This was the genesis of what became the intensive first year course, primarily intended for the Foreign Office, but later attended by regular undergraduates and graduates. At once Nancy set about creating her own materials for a grammar, and then a companion vocabulary, as the last Persian grammar in English had first been published over fifty years earlier. She planned to combine in one volume grammar, samples of Persian prose, and a section devoted to the Arabic element in Persian, which would serve both as a teaching manual and also a reference grammar.

Neither language work, nor the earlier study of dialects, was her main interest, any more than were the shorter pieces of contemporary political comment that she had begun during the war years. As early as the summer of 1936 during the first visit to Jawshaqan she had shown an interest in

recording details about agrarian life, but it was only towards the end of the war years that she began to consider contemporary agrarian problems again with the gradual realisation that agriculture could play an important part in the regeneration of the country. For most of this period there had been little opportunity to pursue any scholarly interests; she had not even the time to keep a diary or a journal of her travels. Then suddenly in the summer of 1944, through an invitation from the Middle East Supply Company (MESCO) in Cairo to write a paper on land tenure, her interest had been reignited. As she admitted, 'I jumped at the offer, hoping it would enable me to get about into the country rather more than has been possible in the last five years.' At once short visits were planned to areas with different kinds of landholding practices, and she began to familiarise herself with some of the problems.

From the beginning it was clear where her sympathies lay. Before the war, in the small peasant proprietor villages of Jawshaqan and Kamu south of Kashan, she had sensed that there had once existed village communities in an earlier golden age, self-contained, self-governed and relatively stable units with a corporate sense and some degree of independence. It was these she wanted to encourage. In contrast were the villages owned by landlords. Islamic inheritance laws, insecurity of tenure, and the absence of primogeniture and entailment of estates, had led to the fragmentation of properties and the destruction of any idea of cooperation in a mutual enterprise. As a result there was no old landed aristocracy or country gentry (like the Lambtons or Horners), with a sense of responsibility and an interest in fulfilling their duties generation after generation. In Persia the landlords were for the most part absentees and living in the towns, with little understanding of the life of the peasant. As a class, she thought them 'greedy, short-sighted, ignorant and totally lacking in public spirit'. It was their estates that Nancy wanted broken up and redistributed. As she explained to Lord Robert Cecil: 'I would like to see greater encouragement given to the peasant proprietor and where possible a breaking up of the big estates, more attention to health and education and all water supplies taken over by some government organization, preferably decentralized in the different provinces.'

It was the unexpected friendship with Doreen Warriner that focused Nancy's mind on the issue of land reform and opened her eyes to a body of specialist knowledge and theory in this field. Doreen Warriner, several years older and already experienced in the agrarian problems of Eastern Europe, was an economist at University College London. She brought to the subject a first class intellect and determined socialist convictions.

During the war she was based at Cairo and worked for the MESC. Her visit to Persia in the late summer of 1944 and their travels together, during which they were arrested by the Russians in Azarbaijan, was the start of a friendship that had a decisive impact on Nancy's subsequent career. Doreen Warriner's passionate support for a peasant society with a coherent social organisation and ethos, whether in Eastern Europe or the Middle East, was an inspiration for Nancy to concentrate seriously on the issues of land tenure and land reform in Persia. From this point onwards her criticisms of the landlord class were more pointed and her emphasis on the need for agrarian reform more insistent, as part of a thorough, radical transformation of all aspects of society.

The initial idea for *Landlord and Peasant in Persia: a Study of Land Tenure and Land Revenue Administration* (London, 1953), the book that established Nancy's scholarly reputation, came from an invitation in the autumn of 1947 from Chatham House to write on land tenure issues. The previous year Doreen Warriner had been commissioned to write a more general study, *Land and Poverty in the Middle East* (London, 1948), which concentrated on the Arabic-speaking areas. Nancy was asked to undertake a comparable study of land tenure in Persia, with an equal emphasis both on the present practice and its historical development. Sabbatical leave, after teaching for three years at SOAS, was granted and she left for Persia in July 1948 and stayed until late September 1949. After spending three weeks in Jawshaqan with the Haidaris, by now almost a ritual of reintegration into Persian family and rural life, and two weeks with their relatives, the Boroumands at Gaz, near Isfahan, she settled down to library work in Tehran over the winter months. Surprisingly, she was not altogether at ease in the Tehran libraries, a little put off by the poor cataloguing, difficulty of access, and the sheer amount of material that had to be looked at before anything valuable could be found. She was much happier in travelling, in firsthand observation and interviewing on the spot. From early spring 1949 until the autumn, three great swathes of the country were covered—the southern circuit of Khuzistan to Fars, an eastern journey to Khorasan, Sistan and Kerman, and to the west, Hamadan, Kurdistan and Azarbaijan. She usually travelled alone between the main centres, staying with Persian friends, sometimes with AIOC representatives and missionaries, collecting information from the villages she visited, noting down in terse and precise detail a mass of information. The only peasant proprietor villages where she stayed any length of time were Jawshaqan and Gaz, otherwise she tried to broaden her knowledge of other kinds of tenure and landholding by exploring new regions. Wherever

she went, she kept detailed notes, daily written up in unostentatious plastic-covered Persian booklets. It became a standard pattern of how she worked, a practice followed in all her subsequent journeys.

It had not been possible to escape the recent past of her war years. During this sabbatical year her earlier reputation still shadowed her. Whilst amongst friends in Jawshaqan, Gaz and Isfahan, this was not a problem, but as soon as she reached Tehran there had been attacks on her in the local press and also from Radio Baku, the nearest Soviet propaganda station, where she was called an arch-imperialist reactionary. In the course of this year she was at times kept under surveillance by the Persian authorities. On these occasions she light-heartedly complained of outbursts of 'midsummer madness' and 'an Arabian nights atmosphere', but a more painful nerve was touched, particularly when she considered the effect this might have on her Persian friends. Early in her stay, she commented that 'The nefarious plans behind my visit as seen by them [the Persian press] are incredible. They are silly people but it is rather tiresome because it interferes with my freedom of action and produces all sorts of unfounded suspicions. I suppose it was unreasonable of me to have assumed that six years of fairly intensive political activity would be regarded as an interlude in my otherwise blameless career!' It had been impossible to avoid politics entirely, however much she tried, and whilst in Tehran she saw most of those old networks with whom she had been in close contact during the war. Some had become personal friends and whose company she enjoyed, others had helped her with her research on land tenure and made useful introductions.

The bulk of the research for the book as originally conceived had been completed in the course of this year. Initially she hoped that a draft would be ready quite soon after her return, but it took much longer because of the temptation to add several long historical chapters. The result was that the book had grown too large and its scope too broad to be included in the Middle East and Economic and Social Studies series as had been intended. Instead it was in two distinct parts, the first an historical background from the Arab conquests to the Constitutional Revolution in the first decade of the twentieth century, and the second a survey of the developments from Reza Shah to the present. Given the state of Iranian historiography, the whole history of agrarian society over a span of nearly a millennium and a half could hardly be treated evenly. More detailed material was available for the Saljuqs and the nineteenth century, the periods worked on for her thesis and during this sabbatical year, and less for the Ilkhanids, Timurids and Safavids. But this ambition brought its own rewards. In every period

reference was made to a range of unusual primary sources, examples were incorporated into the text, and technical terms explained, their origins, development and different usages discussed, in the text, footnotes or glossary. It was a remarkable achievement, packed with precise and detailed information, 'indeed so full and detailed', as one contemporary reviewer remarked in the first volume of *Islamic Quarterly* (1954),

as to make some chapters difficult to read. But those who are brave enough to confront the massed ranks of the author's learning will be rewarded with a rare and fascinating sight: the slow revelation, through the careful accumulation of significant facts, of the essential structure of one of the oldest and greatest of human societies, gradually changing under the impact of historical events, yet remaining itself beneath all the changes.

Regarded by many as a classic in the sixty years since it was first published, it has been an indispensable guide and reference work for the history of agrarian life in Iran.

In the second part of *Landlord and Peasant*, based on the information that she had collected during her travels in the sabbatical year and supplemented by the notes made before and at the end of the war, she produced an extraordinarily detailed survey of agrarian practice in the first half of the twentieth century. It deserves to be treated as a primary source, a marvellously rich contemporary document of rural life. In the conclusion, there was a passionate clarion call for action to remedy the inequalities in rural society, a sense of urgency that action must be taken soon as Persia was on the verge of a general collapse. It was an apocalyptic vision of Persian society, pointing to the danger that the wider bonds holding society together would dissolve and leave the country facing the threat of communism. Only a social revolution, a fundamental change in the conception of society, in the relationship of the individual to society, would avert this disaster.

The same sense of impending catastrophe is evident in the several articles she had written on contemporary Persian politics after her return to London. These had been published in the *Chatham House Review*, *International Affairs* and *The World Today*. Some contained straightforward journalistic reportage, others were more analytical. She was consolidating her reputation as the most knowledgeable and best informed commentator on Persian contemporary life and politics. Perhaps, as she had foreseen in the war years, after all her experiences then and the later interest in land reform, there could have been no quiet return to academic life and scholarly isolation. Her views would be sought informally by poli-

ticians, the Foreign Office, and the AIOC. In the Azarbaijan crisis of 1946, for example, she had given sensible advice to both the Iranian embassy and the Labour cabinet, and during her sabbatical year she had written up her impressions about the internal situation for the oriental secretary in Tehran. Despite what might have once been a quite genuine desire to keep aloof from any political involvement, she found it too difficult. She probably also felt it a moral imperative to give the best counsel she could when asked.

The most striking example of this willingness to intervene and give advice was Nancy's role in the Mosaddeq crisis—the most controversial episode of her life. She had of course come across Dr Mosaddeq in the war years, when he had been a major figure in political life with the reputation for personal probity and liberal social views, but she did not know him at a personal level. He had not been within her group of contacts. Indeed, as an anti-colonial nationalist, he was strongly opposed to her friends and the old wartime networks. In his reformist social policies and his measures for land reform, Mosaddeq's ideas would not have been far removed from Nancy's own, but there could have been no political collaboration. She operated through different channels; he belonged to the highly educated, westernised, political élite with whom she had little sympathy. She accepted the predominant British view about Dr Mosaddeq. He had usually been described in the terse description of the 'Personalities' file as 'a demagogue and a windbag', an estimate passed down the generations of British diplomats from the 1920s onwards. Reader Bullard added that he was epileptic, old beyond his years, and a rich landowner. Nothing that had happened since had caused Nancy to reconsider her views. Before he had become prime minister in 1951, she had hastily dismissed his proposals for land reform as insincere, concerned only with preserving his own class interests.

When the movement for the nationalisation of the AIOC gathered pace, she became involved not out of any great admiration for the company. She liked and had been friends with their representatives in Tehran, but in principle was prejudiced against 'big business' and had been uncomfortable with the discriminatory social attitudes of the expatriate 'oil-boiling' communities in Khuzistan. Seeing Abadan at close quarters, she did revise her views about some of the company's housing and welfare policies and saw how living standards there might be an example of how they could be more generally improved throughout the country. But, like several in the Foreign Office, she was critical of how the AIOC had acted in recent years. Opportunities for a settlement had been missed. However,



she believed that a crucial British interest, perhaps the largest overseas investment in the Empire, could not be simply appropriated. There had to be a negotiated settlement, in which legitimate British oil interests would be protected as far as possible and compensation agreed for what was surrendered. From the start she was convinced that would not be possible with Mosaddeq. She thought that a compromise could be reached, but Mosaddeq had to be removed first.

In the spring and summer of 1951 there were several occasions when advice was given as to how this process of destabilisation might begin. As soon as the nationalisation of the AOIC had taken place, Herbert Morrison, the Foreign Secretary, had sent a warship to Abadan and threatened a land assault in what was called Operation Buccaneer. It seems likely that Nancy suggested a less reckless response to the crisis. The Embassy, she argued, had pursued the wrong strategy in the last three years by supporting an inherently weak Shah and ignoring those who had advanced British objectives in the war years. The general antipathy against the Shah and the corruption of the Court had rebounded on the British, who were held to be responsible as his protector and guardian. In turn anti-British sentiment was directed against the oil company, the most visible centre of British power and influence. The Embassy needed diplomats, she thought, who understood the Persian character and could re-establish contact with its genuine allies. Nancy recommended that her wartime colleague, Robin Zaehner, now back in Oxford as the lecturer in Persian after his experiences in Persia and Albania in SOE, should be sent to Tehran at once to reactivate the old networks that had proved so effective in supporting British policy in the war years and during the Azarbaijan crisis. He was the person, she argued, 'to give the Persians confidence and to set the plan in motion'. She was optimistic that Mosaddeq's position could be shaken 'almost immediately' by overt and covert means of propaganda and persuasion, in mobilising opposition against him and supporting those Persians, 'the relatively enlightened', whose view of the Persian national interest coincided with British plans. After his fall a new government could be installed and begin serious long-term reform with the prospect of the evolution of political and social institutions towards real representative government.

The same suggestion had been given informally to Foreign Office diplomats when asked, together with the proposal to mount a propaganda campaign through the Persian service of the BBC, much as had happened with such spectacular results ten years earlier which had brought about the abdication of Reza Shah. Initial meetings were held but the BBC had

its own plans which were coordinated with the Foreign Office and the Embassy in Tehran. As the crisis developed, Nancy also gave several talks on the current situation, some at Chatham House, and she published a number of articles and letters in the national media. Although these were anonymous, it was well known in the Foreign Office what could be attributed to her, and officials often quoted these views in an attempt to give credibility to their own. There was even the suggestion from one busy diplomat in late 1951 that she might be sent to Tehran to report back on the situation on the ground.

By this time the Conservatives had won the election and Anthony Eden was again Foreign Secretary. He was aware of Nancy's record in Tehran in the war and the award of the OBE for her services then; only a short time previously, when he had been in opposition, she had sent him Persian newspapers to read, and he had a high opinion of her 'remarkable first hand knowledge of Persians and their mentality'. Until the files of MI6 are released for this period it will be impossible to know what informal advice was given in the months leading up to the coup of August 1953, but after Zaehner returned in the summer of 1952, resigned to the failure of his mission and convinced that there was no prospect of undermining Dr Mosaddeq's position, it is unlikely that Nancy was directly involved. No evidence has yet emerged that she played any part in the planning of the coup, attended meetings, or indeed approved of force, as opposed to propaganda and persuasion, in deposing Dr Mosaddeq's government. Whether privately she was consulted by Eden, intelligence chiefs, or any of her relatives now highly placed in government, it is impossible at this stage to tell. But from the present evidence available there are no grounds for describing her as the architect of the 1953 coup, the *éminence grise* of British intelligence who initiated the whole operation, as has been claimed.

Nevertheless, in hindsight it is difficult to explain her miscalculation of the strength and nature of nationalist feeling in Iran and of the personality of Dr Mosaddeq. She had as recently as two years earlier spent some months in Tehran, but events had moved at a rapid pace in the interim and her contacts were mostly limited to the networks established in the war years. She did not know the key members of the National Front around Dr Mosaddeq, or appreciate how nationalism was no longer the same phenomenon that she could dismiss as fragile and insincere ten years earlier. In the Azarbaijan crisis of 1946 she had clearly recognised that 'what the Persian people desire above all is freedom from interference in their internal affairs, freedom to begin to set their house in order', and the

reforms they desire are ones they mean to carry out themselves, 'within the framework of their national state and in accordance with their own needs and national traditions'. But when British interests were directly challenged through oil nationalisation a few years later, interference and covert means were thought acceptable. It was then that she fell back on her wartime experiences and tried to apply the strategies employed at that time to a different situation. It was a failure to recognise that the dynamic of Persian nationalism had changed, and also perhaps it was indicative of an excessive loyalty to old friends and supporters, those whose ideas of the Persian national interest coincided with her own.

By the time of Dr Mosaddeq's fall and the creation of a new oil Consortium, Nancy's standing in the academic world had been confirmed by her appointment to the chair of Persian at SOAS. It had been a rapid elevation, skipping the first grade and then moving through the remaining two in barely eight years. With the publication of *Landlord and Peasant*, shortly to be followed by *Persian Grammar* (London, 1953) and then *Persian Vocabulary* (Cambridge, 1954), election to the chair and the award of the D.Lit. from the University of London, any doubts that she once might have had about her qualifications for an academic career had been comprehensively extinguished. The inaugural lecture, 'Islamic Society in Persia', given in early 1954, was a restatement of her views on the classification of Persian society, on urban administration, and the effect of modernisation on the traditional structures of urban, rural and tribal life, ending with a reflection on the breakdown in society in recent years due to the dissolution of its corporate structure. There was only the most oblique allusion to the 'recent manifestations' of the Mosaddeq years. It ended with an uncharacteristic peroration: 'For myself, I can say that it is my earnest wish to see Persia, a land steeped in tradition and culture, rise like the fabulous Phoenix, and in so doing recovering the art of constructive individual expression through mediums compatible with the age and attaining to new heights of glory.' The sincerity of the vision could hardly be questioned, though in the wake of Dr Mosaddeq's overthrow a few months earlier and in light of the subsequent history of Iran in the next half century, the metaphor makes uncomfortable reading today.

At a more prosaic level, at the time of the inaugural lecture there was no indication yet of a plan for her own research or more generally for the field. There had been no doctoral students up to this point, and in the next decade the only one taken on came at Gibb's suggestion, not with her encouragement or even very effective supervision. In her own research, there seemed to be a moment of hesitation as if she did not know what

direction it should take after *Landlord and Peasant*. Instead of one major topic in mind, she moved between slighter contributions to current affairs journals and a handful of scholarly articles on the three main areas of medieval political thought, administrative history, and the Qajars. In the next ten years, there were some signs that she was thinking about a book on the nineteenth century, but for that she needed to return to Iran for several months and resume work on primary sources in Tehran libraries. A short visit in June 1954 showed her how difficult that might be. She had been engaged by the Consortium to check the Persian texts of the various documents being drawn up as the negotiations for a new oil agreement were reaching a conclusion. As soon as the Iranian government realised she had been issued a visa in London, it tried to prevent her coming, fearing that the presence of such a controversial figure at a delicate moment might cause difficulties. But she had already arrived and, on the advice of the British Embassy, she lay low until her work was finished and then quietly left. Apart from another brief visit of a few weeks in the summer vacation of 1956, mostly spent in Jawshaqan and travelling in Kurdistan, and a later brief stop over on the way to Karachi, she had to wait for a second year of sabbatical leave in the summer of 1959 before she could take up her Qajar research in earnest.

It was the first time she had returned for any length of time for ten years. She did spend the winter months in Tehran working in libraries, and later some days in Mashad and Isfahan, looking at newspapers and other material of the later Qajar period; she interviewed a few of the older Tehran élite who had interesting reminiscences, and with one or two religious figures she discussed the Constitutional Revolution. But in the autumn she had travelled, walked and climbed for nearly three months in the south and, before the winter was over, she set off again to visit areas that she had not seen for some time. In the course of the year she had climbed in the Alamut region in the Alborz mountains, made the ascent of two of the highest peaks in Iran, Oshtaran Kuh in the Zagros mountains and Shirkuh near Yazd, and joined a spring migration with the Mazidi tribe in southern Persia. Conscious that she was spending too much time in travelling generally, she confessed to a friend:

I sometimes wonder whether the School won't look a bit surprised when they find how much of my time I have been spending whizzing round the countryside, so any grist to the mill is welcome. I suppose the School might say that I was not an anthropologist or a sociologist and it wasn't my business to investigate such things [tribal society]—however I shall continue.

Though she did find the nineteenth century well worth studying and felt ‘I ought to make something of it—sweat though it’ll be before I finish’, the temptation to travel was too great.

This is what she enjoyed most of all, but she also took it very seriously, making notes on whatever she had seen of rural and tribal life and agrarian conditions, just as she had always done from her first visits in the 1930s. Agrarian reform was a subject that linked together both her historical and contemporary interests. It had a political significance and a wider radical agenda, as she had argued in the final chapter of *Landlord and Peasant*. Land reform would have to be part of a wider revolution in society; it could not be considered in isolation. She had no expectation that this might happen. Earlier attempts in the Mosaddeq period she thought flawed and those of the later 1950s inadequate. Then quite suddenly the prospect for serious reform was transformed with the appointment of Hasan Arsanjani as the minister of agriculture in a reforming, liberal government in 1961. At first she was as usual sceptical and cautious about the sudden attention given to agrarian reform. She did not appear to have known him well beforehand, though Arsanjani had a long record of being a serious advocate of land reform.

Once new legislation had been approved by early 1962, Nancy realised that it incorporated the two central elements of breaking the political and social influence of the landowning class and bringing about the emergence of an independent peasantry that she had always advocated. It had, she thought, ‘a touch of genius’. At the beginning of the summer vacation of that year, she went to Tehran at the first opportunity and within a day or two had interviewed Arsanjani. It had helped that the Persian translation of *Landlord and Peasant* had been published just the year before; it had been reviewed widely, attracted a lot of attention, and Arsanjani had read it carefully. Their views were very similar, and from the beginning they established a surprising rapport. She thought him ‘a dynamic man of considerable personal energy, determination, vigour, and toughness’. Five days later he had invited her to attend the first distribution of lands to the peasants at Lasht-e Nisha, where her work was praised. Thereafter all doors were opened. Permission was given to travel wherever she wanted, transport was provided, and land reform officials told to show her the recent developments and achievements.

Nancy had seized the moment, and was caught up in its excitement and promise. She was there at the right place and the right time, and wanted to believe something important was taking place which would have a profound effect on Persian society. It seemed to fulfil everything

that she had hoped for in the last twenty years or more: the transformation of peasant lives, the revival of 'an independent, self-supporting, self-respecting peasantry', the elimination of the landlords, the end of their political power, and the rehabilitation of rural life vis-à-vis the town. But it was also more than this. She had always felt that the moral regeneration of society had to start with agrarian reform. As Doreen Warriner put it, 'Land reform might prove to be the string which would unravel the tangled web of corruption because it might induce pressure from below'; it would be 'the cornerstone in a new organization of society'. There was a sense of exhilaration at what was happening, more controlled in Nancy's subdued prose, but palpable in the way Doreen Warriner summed it up in her *Land Reform in Principle and Practice* (London, 1969): 'There are the supersonic moments in social history which few are privileged to experience at first hand.'

Over the next ten years, seven of the summer vacations were spent in charting the progress of the land reform and cooperative movement. Each summer for weeks on end, in a punishing schedule that taxed her physical strength, sometimes ill from malaria or fever, she criss-crossed much of Iran. Usually accompanied by land reform representatives or officials from the cooperatives, choosing those areas affected by the different phases of the land reform legislation, on each occasion large parts of the country were covered. Some places she visited more than once in the course of these years, with others her knowledge went back to the late 1940s or earlier. Her observations were recorded in the same little notebooks she always took with her, giving the bare facts and unadorned details of what she found, and her impressions of the peasants in each particular place she visited and the land reform officials whom she met. In the early years there was a sense of optimism. She felt that a new kind of official was emerging with what amounted to an *esprit de corps*, something quite new in Persian administration, with a willingness to take responsibility. There was rare praise for their optimism, enthusiasm, even missionary zeal, which she found infectious. She felt as though she herself was involved in this transformation of Persian society. Some of the highlights for her had indeed been taking part in the collection of statistics, and watching the settlement of disputes. In the early 1960s too, the cooperative movement, closely integrated into the land reform legislation, had been fundamental to 'the awakening of the countryside' and the emergence of peasant leadership, 'an extremely important development, not only in terms of land reform, but also for the general well-being of the country'.

The book that summarised the results of the first four summers of these travels, *The Persian Land Reform 1962–1966* (Oxford), was published quickly in 1969, when the outcome was still uncertain. In part this was out of a certain embarrassment; she had not published a book for over fifteen years and during these travels reference was always being made to *Landlord and Peasant*. As she told a friend, ‘... each time I was introduced a little bit more was added to me and my book. That is how legends grow, I suppose. It’s all a great fraud, really, and what’s more I must get on with my next book—one can’t go on living on the reputation of the last one.’ But it was primarily because she wanted to give as much publicity and encouragement to the land reform as she could, in the hope that its momentum would be maintained. Already early doubts had been expressed after Arsanjani’s resignation in 1963 and disturbing signs accumulated in subsequent years that the drive and integrity of the original reform were slowly being diluted. By the later 1960s and the implementation of the second and third phases of the reform, the emphasis had shifted towards increased production, no longer on an independent peasantry and a strong cooperative movement, but more on the removal of the landowning class and greater government control. A new political dimension had been introduced that changed its direction and motivation. By the early 1970s the new objectives of rapid mechanisation, large commercial farms for cash crops, government corporations, and agro-businesses, were quite different from the original vision of Arsanjani and herself.

After the summer vacation of 1972, she never returned to Iran again, apart from a brief visit for an academic conference on medieval history in 1977. The general interest in agrarian matters and land reform was sustained through visits to Iraq and Ethiopia, and her work for the Plunkett Foundation. But any hope for the land reform’s transforming impact on Iranian society had been extinguished by what she thought was the Shah’s cynical policy towards rural development. The high hopes of the early 1960s ended in disappointment, but in her book and later articles she left a testimony to those aspirations and a narrative of how over the decade they gradually faded. In the Japanese expression, her work was ‘written not with the hands but with the feet’, old-fashioned perhaps in its approach, highly subjective in its opinions, but born from a lifetime’s experience, and with many vivid vignettes of rural society taken from the pages of the notebooks that record these remarkable journeys.

Though many of these travels had to be made by vehicle accompanied by land reform officials, she was always able to snatch a few precious days by herself in the mountains, ‘with rucksack, bread and dates’, moments

of intense pleasure, tersely captured in the notebooks, as for example when she was walking alone in the high Alborz and stayed the night in a shepherd's hut:

This was a delightful and profitable evening—one of those 'bonuses' that one gets from time to time in the most unexpected places as one travels about the countryside. I slept on the roof; it was a nearly full moon and a glorious night. The peace and absolute stillness of the valley when I arrived at sunset was wonderful—one of those rare experiences of almost perfect peace. I didn't sleep at all because fleas were troublesome and it was slightly cold but mainly, perhaps, because I enjoyed looking at the stars and the hills around me. The mule seemed to spend the whole night munching, tied up just beside the hut.

Down to earth and unsentimental, she hardly ever revealed the intensity of these feelings in her published work, but a single purple passage of startling brilliance in the first chapter of *The Persian Land Reform* suggests the depth of her affection for the Persian landscape.

From the above it will be realized that Persia is a country of infinite variety. It is also one of great beauty. The magnificent peaks of the Elburz, the rugged splendour of the Bakhtīārī mountains, the wild beauty of the Kūhglūyeh with their oak-covered lower reaches, the hills of Īlām studded with trees, the steep and tangled valleys of Kurdistān, the wide rolling country of Tikāb and Dīvān Darreh, the wonderfully clear and limpid waters of Lake Galleh Gahar set among steep rocky mountains, the oases on the plateau where one is seldom out of sight of mountain ranges, the colours of which constantly change in the clear atmosphere, the thick Caspian forests, and the central desert with its fantastic shapes and grim beauty, the blossom of the wild almond and pistachio trees in the mountains of southern Fārs, the glorious splash of colour made by the fields of wild anemones in spring, the exquisite beauty and delicacy of the mountain flowers, the tree or garden watered by a *qanāt* or spring offering refreshment and peace in the midst of a barren landscape—these and many other scenes belong to the magic of Persia.

Similarly, only very occasionally, as in the obituary for her friend, Doreen Warriner in Volume 51 of the *Slavonic and East European Review* (1973), is it possible to glimpse the depth of feeling in her personal friendships:

Those who were privileged to know Doreen Warriner, and those in whose hearts her example kept alive in dark times the flame of freedom, will remember her as a person of wisdom and compassion, of infinite resource and abundant commonsense. We shall also remember her unconquerable optimism in spite of her political realism, and last but not least her gaiety and humour.

In writing about Doreen Warriner, she also revealed her own ambitions for the Persian peasant and what had provided the inspiration for a large



part of her own working life. It might have been the epitaph she would have wanted for herself:

By nature a radical, she cared passionately for the freedom of others to live their own lives . . . Peasants were for her individuals with their own problems, aspirations and needs, individuals for whom she cared and whose problems she knew at first hand; she made it her task to describe and define, with the utmost care and concern, these problems against the background of their relevant social structure and the prevailing system of land tenure, knowing this to be a necessary preliminary to their remedy.

Before the land reform had become her central interest during the 1960s, it had been expected that Qajar history would be the focus of Nancy's research. Though no book had come from the sabbatical leave of 1959–60, over the next two decades there was a number of articles (as many as fifteen) that dealt with different aspects of the long nineteenth century from the late 1780s until the 1920s. Some were wide-ranging surveys, on politics, society, economics, land tenure and administration, others discrete case studies based on legal cases in the Foreign Office files, or a particular religious text. There were a few studies of aspects of the Constitutional Revolution 1906–11, two important articles on secret societies and political societies in this period, and a detailed account of an earlier protest, the Tobacco Regie of the early 1890s. From the mid-1950s onwards the idea of writing a general book on the Qajars had been in her mind, but it needed months of patient, quite tedious work on poorly catalogued primary sources in libraries and private archives. During her visits to Persia in the late 1950s and 1960s it was difficult for her to be tied to a library desk when the mountains beckoned and land reform was an immediate priority. The only time that she did attempt a larger study of Anglo-Persian relations in the first half of the nineteenth century, it was based on the Foreign Office records and provided a detailed account of the minutiae of diplomatic negotiations. In that limited sense, its ten chapters of closely written foolscap pages is not without value, but by the 1970s it represented a kind of diplomatic history that had fallen out of fashion and she wisely abandoned it unpublished. By then she had lost the heart for extensive work in the archives and she focused more on her earlier medieval interests.

The medieval period particularly suited her gifts, demanding an unrivalled mastery of difficult Persian prose, an extraordinary command of a specialist, often obsolete vocabulary, and a deep understanding of the way in which medieval society, both rural and urban, worked. The material was more limited, most of it available in published form, and much of it

in her own personal library. The topics she wrote on reflected the same wide-ranging approach of her earlier articles—Saljuq administration, political thought, agriculture and land tenure, and Islamic mirrors for princes. On the point of her retirement from SOAS she published twelve of these earlier articles, written between the early 1950s and early 1970s, in the Variorum Reprints series with the title *Theory and Practice in Medieval Persian Government* (London, 1980). Almost at the same time, as if deliberately drawing a line under her long years of association with the School and honouring her obligations to that institution, her past teachers and present colleagues, she decided to publish the lectures that she had given for many years on Islamic political ideas. These had been based on the course that Gibb had given in the 1930s, which she had attended as a graduate student. The dedication was to the School, as ‘a small token of my gratitude to the School for the training I received there both as a student and as a member of staff’; of Gibb, she wrote ‘like all great teachers, he gave his students wings and enabled them to soar’. These were published with the title *State and Government in Medieval Islam: an Introduction to the Study of Islamic Political Theory: the Jurists* (Oxford, 1981).

By this time Nancy had retired from the School where for well over thirty years she had been responsible for the Persian teaching at all levels, for much of the time taking the elementary course herself, teaching long hours to beginners and undertaking what after so many years must have been the tedium of introducing undergraduates to medieval prose texts. It was another way in which she emulated Gibb. There were no concessions to modern methods of language instruction, but her *Persian Grammar*, at least in her hands, was an effective weapon, and she took few hostages. The feeble fell by the wayside, the determined usually survived, the rigour of her classes counterbalanced by the exuberance of those given by Amir Abbas Haidari, the schoolboy whom she had first met in the Isfahan hospital in the mid-1930s. Those fortunate enough to have withstood the experience regarded themselves as belonging to an élite and ‘enchanted confraternity’, dubbed in the post-Revolution Tehran press as ‘Nancy’s boys’ (they were mostly male, women just tolerated). By the 1960s she had begun to take an interest in supervising the doctoral dissertations of a handful of graduates, less than ten in total over all the years, to some of whom she devoted extraordinary care and attention. For much of her last decade at SOAS she had heavy administrative responsibilities as head of a department in which she felt increasingly at odds. After a serious cycling accident in November 1978 which had kept her away from work and off her bicycle for several months, no longer able to carry it up and down the

five floors to her top flat in Maida Vale, or play squash with quite the same energy as in the past, she was glad to retire and leave London at the earliest opportunity. In a brief letter of thanks to the director of the School, she referred to her teachers from the 1930s, Denison Ross, Gibb, and Dodwell, thanked the administration and, in a typically courteous gesture of noblesse oblige, 'a long succession of porters whose help has always been unstinted'. After an unconventional start, it had been an academic career of stellar success, with a British Academy Fellowship in 1964, followed by honorary doctorates at Durham and Cambridge, and honorary fellowships at SOAS and New Hall, Cambridge. Later she was made an honorary vice-president of the British Institute of Persian Studies, to which she had for several decades given conscientious service, and an annual memorial lecture was established in her honour at Durham University.

Retirement and her accident coincided with the Islamic Revolution. It had already become difficult to keep in contact with what was happening in Iran in the 1970s. She had travelled there only once for any length of time in this decade. By 1975 she had ceased to contribute an entry on Iran to the *Annual Register of World Events*. About the Revolution she made no public lecture or comment. The only letter written to the press at this time was about the suffering of the Christian community in Isfahan. The one article she wrote, with which she is credited with having predicted the Revolution fifteen years before it happened ('A reconsideration of the position of the Marja' al-Taqlid and the religious institution': *Studia Islamica*, 20, 1964), should rather be seen in the context of her ability to seize on the importance of new doctrinal and institutional developments in Shi'i thought and give an accurate resumé of them, not as a prediction of what would happen, but only the potential that had always been dormant in twelver Shi'ism. It most probably had arisen from an earlier contact in the late 1950s with a reformist ayatollah, Sayyed Mahmud Taleqani, but that was one of the very few discussions she ever had with the older members of the Shi'i religious hierarchy, apart from the two Arabic tutors in her youth with whom she had remained in contact during the war years and afterwards.

With the move from Maida Vale to Northumberland, relieved of the burden of teaching and administration, recovered from her accident, Nancy was rejuvenated. She was comfortably settled in a modest cottage in a hamlet on the northern edge of the Cheviots, with several relatives living nearby, and close to one of the seats of the Earl of Durham, Fenton House, which she had often visited in childhood. She could now concentrate on what she wanted to do. First was the preparation of a series of

lectures given in 1981 at Columbia, and then transforming these over several years into a substantial monograph, *Continuity and Change in Medieval Persia: Aspects of Administrative, Economic and Social History, 11th–14th Century*, which was eventually published in 1988 (New York and London). Considered by some as her most important book, it was described in a review article (J. M. Rogers, ‘A new view of medieval Persian history’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 121, 1989) as ‘a great and exciting book (*multum in parvo*) by a great scholar’, and praised for having transfigured and enriched traditional views of Saljuq and Mongol society, especially the chapter on the status of women. This research also provided an abundance of material for several more articles of formidable scholarship, as many as twelve and as valuable as any of the past, on administrative, economic, and social history. An expanded edition of *Landlord and Peasant* in 1991 (London) saw the addition of considerable new material about the Mongol period in a long preface, reflecting a return to her earlier interest in the rural society of medieval Persia.

Despite the distance away from specialist libraries and her increasingly infrequent visits to London, through a wide circle of acquaintances and admirers Nancy always remained in touch with recent scholarship and its bibliography. This was particularly important for another task she had set herself in retirement, her work for the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden, 1960–2009). From the early 1950s she had begun to contribute articles to it—another legacy of Gibb, who had been one of the editors of the second edition. It was a duty that she felt had to be fulfilled. At first it began slowly, but with the greater leisure in retirement she was able to write on a regular basis. There were as many as over forty entries in all, some very substantial articles, tackling long historical periods, important provinces, places, tribes, and technical and administrative terms, sometimes running into several thousand words. It was here that her systematic working methods proved so useful, her books (now in Durham University library) heavily annotated in pencil with an index of important points carefully listed for rapid reference.

Perhaps more remarkable as she worked into her eighth and ninth decades with barely diminished vigour was the noticeable change in her approach as an historian. For the first time she felt able to lighten her style, be less cautious, add a few personal asides and anecdotes, and discuss personalities—at least one or two that after a lifetime of study she felt that she had come to understand a little. The format was the same, an analysis of a particular text, but the mood was different. There was now an attempt to fill out the ideas and policies of the great Saljuq vazir, Nizam al-Mulk, the

author of the *Siyasat-nameh*, the text which had been given to her fifty years earlier by Guy Le Strange. Then another favourite, Rashid al-Din, the vazir of the Mongol rulers at the turn of the thirteenth/fourteenth centuries, is described in her study of a manual he wrote on agronomy (in R. Amitai-Preiss and D. O. Morgan (eds.), *The Mongol Empire and its Legacy*, Leiden, 1999) as someone who ‘was no armchair writer; he knew about the daily routine of farming, the intricacies of irrigation systems, the propagation of plants and the ravages of pests, and also the joy of making successful grafts and transplants’. He was a man after her own heart, ‘immensely erudite, observant and widely travelled, the range of his knowledge and practical experience of agriculture, arboriculture and horticulture was probably unequalled in medieval Persia’. It was both the countrywoman and the scholar speaking. At one stage she had briefly wanted to be a sheep-farmer, or at least combine it with her academic career, and after her move to Northumberland her favourite pastimes were sheep-dipping and felling trees.

The same admiration for this kind of personality can be seen in her last article on the nineteenth century (*Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies*, 33, 1995), a biographical sketch of Sir John Malcolm, army officer, ambassador, traveller, and historian of Persia, for whom she had a particular affection. In a brief moment of understated self-revelation, she attributed to him all the qualities she most admired—man of action, high spirits coupled with sturdy commonsense, tolerance of human frailty, a large humanity and a humility born of respect for the truths of the Christian Church, youthful imagination but also detachment. She might have been describing the qualities to which she herself had aspired—and those she expected to find in her peers and juniors. ‘Malcolm’, she wrote,

was interested in people and wherever he went he talked to the local people, seeking to find out their views of history, their customs, their literary tastes, and their aspirations. From the poorest labourer he held that there was something to be learned . . . He had no taste for pomp and circumstance and was accessible to all. Perhaps he was happiest when sitting with peasants and tribesmen.

*Mutatis mutandis* it might have been the life she would have chosen for herself, always ready to listen to a peasant and to right a wrong, half the day in the saddle and what leisure there was spent in writing histories. Malcolm’s aphorism, ‘if I had not been a traveller I should never have been an historian’, was as much applicable to herself.

This new interest in biography was not unconnected with her study of ecclesiastical history, the other major occupation of the long years of

retirement. She had always been closely involved with the Church in London and Iran, and had been especially supportive when the Diocese of Iran faced acute difficulties in the aftermath of the Revolution. She had chaired the Friends of the Diocese of Iran and been on the Council of the Jerusalem and the Middle East Church Association; she had been made Reader Emeritus at the Diocese of Newcastle, on her ninetieth birthday she preached in Durham Cathedral, and two years later as the culmination of many decades of devoted service to the Church she was awarded the Cross of St Augustine at Lambeth Palace. In her own village at Kirknewton she played an active part in the life of the parish, became a lay reader, and for several years in the 1990s she gave what were called Lent lectures on aspects of Church history, from the Creeds, the early Church fathers, outstanding medieval bishops and theologians, to eighteenth-century divines and prominent leaders of the Victorian church. For the last she relied heavily on the studies of Owen Chadwick and David Newsome, from whom she drew inspiration for a different kind of historical writing, where, quoting from Marc Bloch, 'behind the written documents there are men, and it is men that history seeks and grasps'. It was far from the administrative and institutional history with which she had begun her career.

Nancy was too reticent and reserved to write or talk much about herself, and has left little enough for future historians to understand the essence of her personality. She had no small talk; in company there were often embarrassing silences. It was as if she had protected herself beneath a carapace of indifference, in an attempt to conceal her own awkwardness. She had difficulty in making any emotional contact, at least outside the few close relationships within her family, and she recoiled from any physical touch. As a young woman she disliked the way Persian female friends took her hand or arm, and was uncomfortable with all the 'noisy kissing' at arrivals and departures. In middle age she had assumed the persona of the austere blue-stockings, grey hair swept back in a bun, then close-cropped after her accident, grey herring-bone suit with a skirt almost ankle length, thick stockings and sturdy brogue shoes. Wherever she went she took her old battered rucksack, packed with a few spare clothes and a Persian text to read. It was a striking image, no more so than in Persia, a tall figure striding determinedly down from the head of the pass as I remember her one late afternoon in autumn nearly forty-five years ago. It was in the high mountains above Yazd, at Dehbala, a place that she had come to love more than any other in her later years. We had scrambled to the top of a smaller peak, in the shadow of the great bulk of Shirkuh (the Lion Mountain), and looked across the Abarquh desert towards the hills of

Bavanat and other mountain ranges in the far distance. With the sun highlighting the fine aquiline features of her face, she turned and summed up all her uninhibited delight in the schoolgirl slang of her youth: 'Gosh! What a spiffing view.' It was only years later on reading her notebooks did I learn about the night trek across the Abarquh desert a decade earlier or of two previous attempts at climbing Shirkuh and how she lost the perilous path down and might have been killed. Nor during those days at Dehbala was I aware that she had made careful notes about the family of our host, an ordinary peasant family, encouraged one of the young daughters to go to school, and four years later, in the final days of her last visit to Dehbala, was concerned she did not have enough good story books and would arrange to have some sent.

Such unobtrusive kindness and thoughtfulness were hardly known to those who only saw the severe professor in the classroom or the awkward, unapproachable presence standing alone at a reception. Where she felt at ease, within her own family, with a handful of close friends, amongst country people, or the two Persian families from Jawshaqan and Gaz to whom over the years she had become attached, with these she could relax and enjoy their company. Once approval was given, total loyalty was expected, and in turn reciprocated with a surprising warmth of sympathy and generosity. In her later life there were no limits to the hours she would devote to the aspiring research student struggling with the difficulties of Persian, and well into her nineties she would send back a draft paper meticulously commented on, errors in translation and transliteration corrected. It was a life dedicated to the highest standards of the scholarship that she had learned in her youth, and which she felt was her duty to maintain and pass on. Central to her thinking throughout this long and varied life, as she said in her Durham Cathedral sermon, had been the simple truths of 'the greatness, transcendence and glory of God, the love of God and the Father, a sense of the presence of God and a looking forward in hope'. She died on 19 July 2008, and is buried in the churchyard at Kirknewton, close to ancestral Lambton lands and the house where she had lived for nearly three decades, beneath the northern escarpment of the Cheviots, gentler hills than those she had climbed in Persia, from both of which she had drawn solace and strength in her unusual life.

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*Note.* In compiling this memoir I have been greatly helped by Professor Lambton's nephew, George Lambton, and by many others, particularly Hugh Arbuthnott, Sir Martin Berthoud, John Cloake, Amir Abbas and Tayyebah Haidari, Jane Hogan, John Jolliffe, Katharine Macmillan Viscountess of Ovenden, Bernard Lewis, William Roger Louis, Helen McCarthy, David Morgan, Susannah Rayner, Michael Rogers, Roger Savory, and Burzine Waghmar. I wish to stress that the opinions and judgements expressed here are mine alone. A bibliography of Professor Lambton's scholarly work up to 1986 was published in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (48, 1986) and several later works are listed in the supplementary bibliography to the 1991 impression of *Landlord and Peasant* (London). The quotations from Professor Lambton's letters and notebooks are from her papers and correspondence, which are in the process of being catalogued at the Archives and Special Collections, Durham University Library.



