

The Travelogues of Mirza Saleh Shirazi A Persian View of Regency London

by Stuart Denison

In terms of writing about different cultures, the British have historically produced a vast body of work exploring, analysing, and commenting on far-flung lands and exotic civilisations. Ever since the publication of Marco Polo's memoirs, reports of explorations to new lands and territories tended to sell well, and remained in print for long periods – at least until the next traveller provided an updated version. Similar trends could be seen across much of Europe, as developing societies began to look further afield in the 1700s and 1800s, while travel itself became simpler and more affordable.

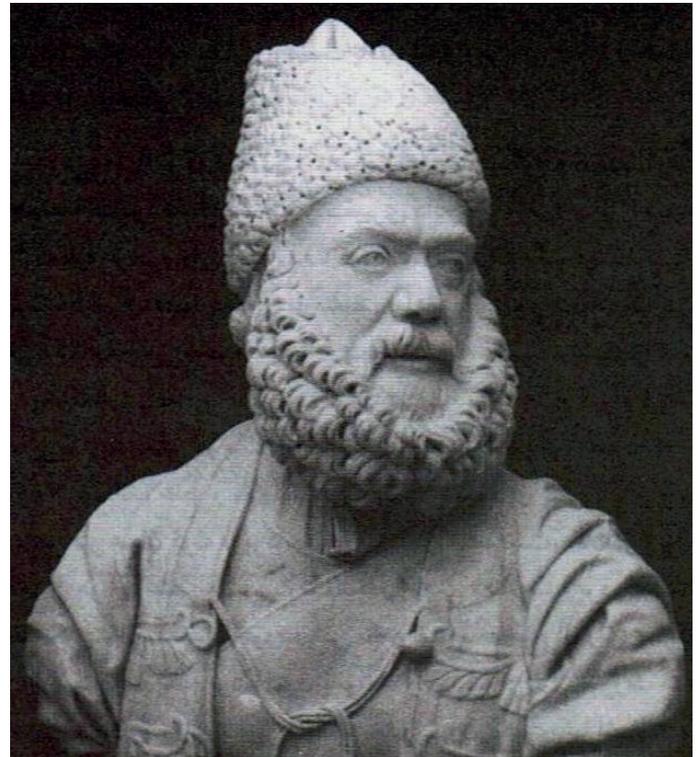
A far less-known phenomenon, however, was that of travellers from overseas writing about the West. Due in part to language difficulties and cultural dominance, these accounts have often been forgotten or overlooked, despite providing useful historical data and portraying European societies in the throes of the Industrial Revolution.

Mirza Saleh Shirazi, a scholar from the Persian royal court, was one of the earliest travellers from the Middle East to write extensively about Britain, compiling his notes into a lengthy travelogue for readers in Iran. Along with four other students, he was dispatched on an educational and fact-finding mission to learn about the progress being made in Europe at the time, with an emphasis on their “science, philosophy, languages, religion and law.”

After traversing the Caucasus region and spending some time in Russia, Shirazi arrived in Britain in 1815, where he spent the next four years. In this time he became the first Persian student to attend Oxford as well as learning of new technologies such as the steam engine and the lithograph. He mingled with various echelons of society, and was reportedly treated as a respected guest wherever he went. The time he spent in London fascinated him the most, however, as he was able to witness a city in the process of rapid modernisation, having to deal with the many social problems of mass industrialisation and urban growth.

Shirazi's impression of London was one of technological marvel mixed with down-to-earth social observations, seeing both the incredible manufacturing potential of the city and the dire poverty and deprivation. For example, he was in awe of the John Rennie-designed construction of the Southwark Bridge (the predecessor of the current one), which boasted the longest arch in the world at the time – a massive 73m cast-iron central span. He despaired, however, at the number of prostitutes walking the streets, and the level of petty crime stalking the slums.

While many of his observations were limited to a listing of facts and figures (ten theatres, 1200 Hackney carriages, 5000 ‘small eateries’, 800 book titles published per year, etc.), the commentary provides a fascinating glimpse into the novelties of the day, as well as showing us what was interesting or different from the Persian point of view. One of the main things that he praises about London is its sense of



‘progress’, which he attributes to the greatness of the Georgian era kings – though perhaps this was intended as a bit of honorific flattery rather than to be seen as a balanced judgement.

Shirazi devotes a large chunk of his book to a sweeping history of Britain, ranging from the Roman Conquest to George III, and seems to find in it a sense of a historical national destiny, praising its ongoing work as an example to be emulated by the Shahs and the people of his homeland. He enthuses about the modern steamboats plying the Thames with the fervency of a convert, while issuing an impassioned plea for people everywhere to learn from England's justice and educational systems. From what he saw of London's youngsters, he found that a well-schooled 15-year-old boy would already have mastered Latin and Greek, and would “know everything about world history.” Girls would “play at least one musical instrument,” and “speak French or Spanish.”

Justice was seen as being accessible to the everyman – something which Shirazi vastly admired. He mentions that the progress of clearing Regent's Street was held up by a solitary old shop-owner who refused to sell up, saying that “The whole army would not be allowed to move him.” These legal rights, he felt, were unique in the world, and had been won “after years of war and struggle.”

Another area which impressed him was London's charitable institutions. He thought it a virtue that the church and its parishioners

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The First Southwark Bridge by John Rennie, opened in 1819.

would collect money for local causes, and even better that this, money was well-managed and used to set up schools for orphans or children of imprisoned parents. One example of this was the Royal Naval Asylum, which looked after the children of servicemen killed overseas, and was based in Queen's House, Greenwich, soon to be re-opened after refurbishment.

These systems of helping out the least fortunate in society were best represented to him by the Magdalen Hospitals, which were centres to help reformed prostitutes find their way back into society through religion and hard work. Twice, he visited the church at which the women worshipped, and says that he was brought to tears by the sight of these “fallen women” trying to redeem their souls.

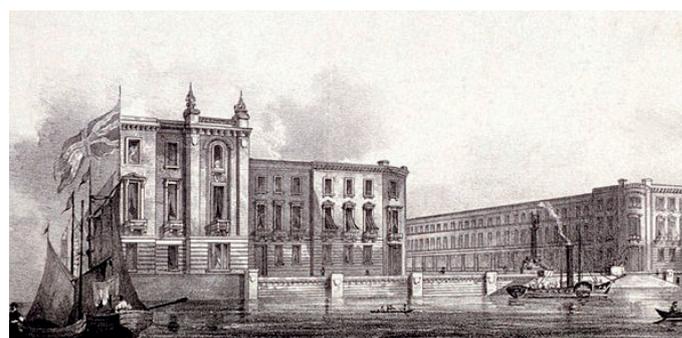
Religion in England generally met with Shirazi's approval, with him preferring the sober and restrained Protestantism on display in London to the Armenian and Orthodox versions of Christianity he had seen earlier on his travels, which he deemed too idolatrous, relying too heavily on religious icons. The “best church” he visited was in Greenwich, while he also complimented St. Paul's cathedral and Westminster Abbey.

He was fascinated by Regency courtship rituals between young men and women, describing their clothes, make-up, hairstyles and manners in great detail. With his Persian audience in mind, he made sure to make careful notes of the latest fashions of the young gentry, which included being “well-groomed and clean-shaven” for men, while debutantes sported “delicate dresses, bare at the arms and at the neck.”

Food and drink also receive significant attention, from formal seven course dinners with royalty to his warm appreciation of the famous London coffeeshops of the era. These were places where a gentleman might peacefully “drink coffee or tea, read a newspaper, and then leave.” Indeed, their eating habits seemed to epitomise the best of the English: “Whenever I lunched with Londoners, I truly enjoyed life. Everyone was extremely polite and in the mood for conversation.”

In 1819, he was summoned back to Persia, and left with a huge trove of experiences to share with his fellow countrymen. He put many of the things he'd learnt into action, importing the first modern printing press and using it to publish the first Iranian newspaper, as well as distributing the first translation of the Qu'ran into Farsi. One of his colleagues was later responsible for modernising the army, while another set up Iran's first medical school.

The impact of his British sojourn on the Qajar era in Iran continued to resonate far beyond the initial trip, turning royal eyes westward in terms of technology, industry, fashions, and new ideas. However, in his writings, he also leaves us with a vivid and alternative picture of London in the Regency period – highlighting aspects of society which might otherwise have been neglected, and providing an external view of this city in flux.



Steamboat at Deptford, 1835.

About Stuart Denison

Stuart is a freelance writer based in Tehran, covering arts, culture, history, travel and the environment in both English and Persian. He has written for Monocle, Atlas Obscura, Roads & Kingdoms, and History Today, as well as being involved in the contemporary arts and theatre scene in Iran.