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Kitap İncelemesi/ Book Review

A History of Persia: From the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century to the Year 1858

Robert Grant Watson, A History of Persia: From the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century to the Year 1858, London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi and Sydney: I.B. Tauris, 2023, 496 pages, ISBN: 978-1144136824

Değerlendiren: Menderes Kurt*

The study of Iran's geography and history has attracted the attention of scholars both within and outside its borders. Over time, numerous researchers, including travelers and diplomats who have visited Iran, have recorded their knowledge and experiences regarding Iranian history. This has led to a significant body of literature pertaining of the subject matter. Nevertheless, the discovery or employment of less widely known works can further enrich our understanding and contribute to accumulating historical knowledge about Iran. In contributing to the literature on Iranian history, the reprinting of Robert Grant Watson's *A History of Persia: From the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century to the Year 1858* is a noteworthy development. The original publication dates back to 1866 (Watson, 1866) and I.B. Tauris Publications released a facsimile edition in 2023 with an introduction by Professor Ali Ansari renowned for his work in Iranian studies. This edition builds upon earlier versions that were published multiple times including a facsimile edition from Adamant Media Corporation in 2005. Watson's work represents an extension of Sir John Malcolm's (Governor of Bombay) *The History of Persia* which was first published as early as two volumes in 1815 (Malcolm, 1815). Malcolm's

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work is regarded as an early contribution to the study of Iranian history and has garnered considerable attention for its comprehensive analysis spanning from ancient times through the start of the 19th century. Watson builds upon Malcolm's research but with a narrower focus, concentrating on specific pivotal events leading up to the establishment of Qajar Dynasty rule over Iran during a period extending from 17th century until 1958, as described by its cover statement "with a Review of the Principal Events that Led to Establishment of Qajar Dynasty".¹ Despite covering broader historical context, this book centers primarily around Iran's socio-political development between Agha Mohammad Khan's death in 1797 and nearly seven decades later in 1858.

Watson's *A History of Persia* is among the earliest works in English on Iranian history, although it did not garner the same level of attention as Malcolm's work. The text offers a comprehensive account of the events that culminated in the establishment of Qajar Dynasty within an area where its foundations were laid during the first half of 19th century. To present a thorough and impartial analysis on how this tribal society developed into a state, Watson draws from both local (Iranian) and foreign sources (i.e., English, French, and Russian). One notable feature distinguishing it from other books produced during this period is its coverage encompassing topics such as geography; population; ethnic distribution; struggles between tribes; Safavid's rise to power followed by their decline alongside Afshars' Zands', ultimately leading to Iran under Qajar dynasty rule. In addition to providing a detailed chronicle of the period it encompasses, Watson's work offers an intricate portrayal of power dynamics and political culture in Iran during a time when European powers, particularly Britain and Russia, were increasing their influence in the region. The quality of this work elevated its status as one of the primary sources on Iranian history at the time Lord G.N. Curzon wrote his book *Persia and the Persian Question* (Curzon, 1892, p. 23) in 1892. Its coverage of Britain's ascent to dominance within that timeframe also shaped British policy towards Iran while earning com-

¹ This subtitle of book (with a Review of the Principal Events that Led to Establishment of Qajar Dynasty) was included in the original edition but has been removed from the cover of the 2023 edition by the publishing house. When asked about the reason for its removal, the publishing house responded with the following explanation: "this was shortened for metadata purposes to make it easier to search for and to reduce the risk of it being cut off when being catalogued."

mentation from Curzon himself. Nonetheless, despite its merits, Watson's work did not garner as much attention compared to Malcolm's *The History of Persia* likely due to its narrow focus on a particular subject and era.

In his book, Watson not only focuses on the seventy-year period after the death of Agha Mohammed Khan up to 1858 but also includes coverage of Safavid, Afghan (Mahmud Afghan), Afshar (Nadir Shah), and Zand (Karim Khan Zand) periods before Iran was dominated by the Qajar Dynasty. His work is titled *A History of Iran* and comprises fifteen chapters which are listed in detail both in the table of contents and chapter headings. The publishing house has maintained this structure in its 2023 edition as well. The initial part of the book presents an elaborate depiction of Iran, encompassing its constituent factors, prior to delving into its historical account. Instead of offering a chronological narration in the first chapter, details are provided regarding population statistics, settlement patterns, geography and climate characteristics along with information pertaining to ethnic structure and distribution, human typology aspects such as religion, education system and military operations alongside commercial activities. Subsequently starting from the second chapter onwards within this literary work by Watson concentrates on providing readers with a narrative concerning Iranian history while emphasizing domestic affairs during the primary half of his text. Later progressing towards the latter portion he shifts his focus onto discussing topics like Qajar Dynasty's emergence whilst reflecting upon Iran's relationship status with various European countries followed by examining their supremacy over surrounding regions in further detail. In Watson's historical narrative, the beginning is marked by the fall of the Safavid Dynasty in 1722 due to Afghan invasion. The book proceeds to cover Afghans rule over Iran and later, under Nader Shah, Afsharid rule before moving on to discuss the Zend period and rise of Qajar Dynasty in Iran. From chapter three onwards, Watson delves into a detailed account of Qajars' political history and struggle for dominance within and outside Iran. Chapters six onwards examine how they worked towards establishing internal stability while dealing with Russia first followed by Britain during their ascent to power. Notably highlighted throughout are competing tribes such as Afshar, Zand, Qajar that shaped Iranian history along with external relations during Qajars' reigns. Watson focuses on detailing and presenting a clear picture of the struggles and political history that the Qajar Dynasty faced both domestically and internationally in order to establish their rule

over Iran. As mentioned earlier, the second part of the book is heavily focused on foreign relations. This section tells the story of the Qajar Dynasty's involvement as a subject in the *Great Game* between Russia and Britain, and their transformation into a subdued entity by the great powers in 1857-58. In short, Watson begins the table of contents with the times when Iran ruled its own fate, whether good or bad. However, starting from the second chapter, Watson ends with a time when Iran's fate was in the hands and dominion of foreign powers, with the rule of the Qajar Dynasty.

It is worth noting that *A History of Persia* was authored by Watson primarily as means for filling gaps within existing English-language literature relating specifically to Iranian history. The primary objective of the work was to cater to the British audience and present a comprehensive history of the Qajar Dynasty. Prior to this work, there had been no such extensive account available other than what Persian chronicles provided on Qajar history. In order to maintain credibility with an English-speaking readership and ensure objectivity, Watson relied not only on Iranian sources but also European (British, French, and Russian) sources while discussing foreign relations. For instance, when dealing with Russo-Iranian relations he consulted both Russian and French sources for accurate information. The author's practice of citing his references by name or through footnotes allows readers to trace back his source material which includes historical records that are unavailable today thereby enhancing the value of this unbiased historical account. Moreover, due to his previous role as a diplomat in the Iranian Legation and personal experience with closely monitoring significant historical events, Watson possesses extensive knowledge on both international politics and domestic policies. Specifically, during the 1856-1857 Anglo-Iranian War under Charles Alison (who served as minister from 1860-1872), he fulfilled duties in Iran. Additionally, prior to this assignment and afterwards, he held positions such as secretary for various embassies including those of Greece, Denmark, Portugal, Sweden and Japan. His multilingual abilities are evident through his fluency in English and French along with partial proficiency in Persian; however when referencing Iranian historical sources within his work he expresses gratitude towards Meerza Muhammad Ibrahim for assistance rendered. Watson's depiction of Iran's geography along with its inhabitants draws heavily upon travel accounts recorded by European travelers whom he extensively read up on before composing his own account which gives insight into the broad

scope of literature Watson had reviewed beforehand. In fact, he benefited from significant travel accounts such as Sir John Chardin's *Travels in Persia*, Pietro della Vallé's *Voyages*, Par Olivier's *Voyages...et la Perse*, Henry Pottinger's *Travels in Beloochistan and Sinde*, Robert B.M. Binning's *Two Years Travel in Persia*, M. Vambéry's *Travels in Central Asia*, Lady Sheil's *Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia*. Travelogues are considered to be secondary sources of information in Watson's work, which relies primarily on diplomatic records and Iranian sources. The most important source that Watson uses is *Ravzatü's-safâ-yı Nâsirî*² written by Riza-Quli Khan Hidayat,³ a fundamental text on Iranian history. In his detailed analysis of Iranian history, Watson frequently cites Riza-Quli Khan's work particularly regarding power struggles between tribes and family genealogies. By utilizing multiple sources while maintaining objectivity, Watson has significantly enhanced the historical significance of his research as a reference material.

Watson sought to differentiate his work from Malcolm's *The History of Persia* while still building upon its foundation. While Malcolm contextualized Iranian history within the classical framework, addressing religion, government, geography and general historical themes in his text under the title "Religion, Government, Usages and Character of the Inhabitants of that Kingdom," Watson aimed to add a personal touch by titling his work "A History of Persia with a Review of the Principal Events that led to the Qajar Dynasty." This approach allowed him not only to focus on a specific time period but also personalize it for readers. It is possible that Gibbon's three-volume publication titled *The History of Decline and Fall of Roman Empire* (1776) served as an inspiration for Watson's desire for personalization. The references to Gibbon in Watson's *A History of Persia* provide

² Ravzatü's-safâ-yı Nâsirî is a 60,000-couplet work that brings Mirhând's Ravzatü's-safâ to the year 1853, relying on mostly unpublished sources and official documents. The work is published in ten volumes, and the last three volumes (from the 8th volume onwards) are an additional work titled *Tarih-i Ravzatü's-safâ-yı Nâsirî*, written by Riza-Quli Khan Hidayat (Tokmak, 2008, p. 64-65; Karadeniz, 2021, p. 336).

³ Riza-Quli Khan Hidayat (d. 1871) was an important intellectual and scholar in Iran during the Qajar period. He was appointed as the tutor (Lala) of Prince Muzaffar al-Din Mirza and later became the head of the Dar al-Funun (Iran's first modern university) under the order of Nasir al-Din Shah. His most significant work, *Ravzatü's-safâ-yı Nâsirî*, is considered as one of the primary sources on 18th century Iran (Tokmak, 2008, p. 64-65; Karadeniz, 2021, p. 336).

evidence for his influence. Although the book centers on the Qajar period, it also covers the decline of Safavid rule and extensively discusses other dynasties such as Afghan, Afshar, and Zand before the rise of Qajars to power. This indicates that Watson may have aimed to emulate Gibbon's vision in *The Roman Empire*. While it remains uncertain whether this was indeed Watson's intention, a careful analysis of the book structure leads us to believe so. Despite giving his work a subjective character with its subtitle addition, he primarily focuses on historical narrative rather than analytical interpretation of events. Thus, we can conclude that Watson draws inspiration from Gibbon while remaining committed to portraying historical facts accurately in his work concerning Persian history during these eras. After the initial two chapters, the book primarily presents an elaborate record of historical events that can be found in several other sources. It is comprehensible that Watson intended to furnish British readers with a historical chronicle and therefore structured his work accordingly. This decision effectively renders his work akin to a chronological account. The adherence of Watson to *Ravzatü's-safâ-yı Nâsirî* and other chronicles has resulted in a narrative structure that closely resembles those of the aforementioned sources. Analysis reveals similarities between Watson's work and Cihangir Mirza's *Tarih-i Nev*, written in 1850, as well as Mirza Muhammed Taki Sipîhr's *Nasihü't-Tevârih* (pre-1957) and *Ravzatü's-safâ-yı Nasirî* (Karadeniz, 2021, p. 329, 332, 336). Through his use of Iranian chronicles and pursuit of uncovering events leading up to the Qajar Dynasty - which was also stated in his title - Watson indirectly achieved his goal albeit somewhat unclearly. Such an approach facilitated reaching his ultimate objective successfully despite some ambiguity involved in it.

In 1866, Watson's publication of *A History of Iran* bridged a significant gap in English-language literature on the subject. However, due to subsequent developments such as the translation of Iranian chronicles into various languages including English and an increase in available literature on Iranian history, Watson's work has been relegated to secondary source status. Nevertheless, researchers can still gain valuable insight from his focus on a fascinating period in history. The Qajar Dynasty's rise to power along with power struggles within Iran and particularly the Great Game between Russia and Britain remain critical topics that make Watson's work an important resource for scholars today. Reading a British diplomat's account of the period when Eastern Empires collided with European civiliza-

tion is an invaluable resource for comprehending how 19th-century Iranian history was shaped. Researchers investigating the ascent and decline of dynasties and states should consider this work, as it to some extent narrates the tale of Iranian dynasty fluctuations. In essence, historians examining Iran's power struggles, connections between Iran and other empires such as Ottoman Empire, Russia, France, and Britain; structure of Qajar Dynasty; and modernization process in Iran must peruse this book without fail.,

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