

SIR PERCY SYKES K.C.I.E., C.M.G., C.B. (1867-1945)

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This article is condensed from his lecture to the Society on 6th November 2001.

His book entitled *Persia in the Great Game – Sir Percy Sykes: Explorer, Consul, Soldier, Spy* is to be published by John Murray in March 2003.

Peter Hopkirk's books on the Great Game deal with the response of British India to the threat of Russian invasion through Central Asia and Afghanistan.¹ His books also describe another and much more real threat of an invasion through eastern Persia. This was a much easier route for the Russians because, unlike Afghanistan, Persia had no real army and was much too weak and corrupt to offer any resistance. The region was largely unknown to us and unmapped.

Sir Percy Sykes spent nearly twenty-five years in Persia, from 1893 until the end of the First World War. His eye-witness accounts give a vivid picture of this very turbulent period of Persia's history.

Sir Percy's branch of the Sykes family had made its money from bleaching in Stockport and had settled in Cheshire. His father, being a younger son, became an army chaplain and in 1888 Sykes went out to join the Queen's Bays in India. He was a tough and dashing officer. In the words of his daughter, "he didn't take to poodle-faking" and preferred exploring the Himalayas.

Army Intelligence, which you joined if you wanted the best shooting, picked him up and in 1892, when he was 25, they sent him on a mission to spy out the new Russian military railway running from the Caspian to Samarqand. Disguised as a Russian and with an Armenian to interpret for him, he did quite well and returned without being detected.

In 1893 Sykes was due to return to India from home leave in England. Instead of going by ship he was sent overland through Persia, with the specific object of looking at new routes on the eastern side. He took the ferry to Ashur Ada and rode, with a servant, through the Turkoman country to Meshed, where the remarkable British consul, Ney Elias, told him to try an unknown route across the Kavir desert to Naiband and the oasis city of Kerman. The roads were full of robbers and Sykes had a few brushes with them. Kerman itself had English missionaries and a branch of the Imperial Bank of Persia, later the British Bank of the Middle East. There was no need to stay there, so he headed west across Buchaqchi bandit country towards Shiraz.

He was not far out of Kerman, in the middle of nowhere near Rafsenjan, when there was a thunder of hooves and Prince Abdul Hussein Mirza Farman Farma, the young Prince-Governor of Kerman, galloped up. This was the most important meeting of Sykes's life, and it made the mould of Anglo-Persian relations for the next twenty years and more. Farman Farma was an educated man. He spoke French well and had been trained in an Austrian military academy. He was delighted to meet Sykes, whom he saw was a sportsman, and invited him to join in a gazelle shoot. Farman Farma enjoyed his company and they became good friends. The importance of this chance friendship is that at that time the British had no such easygoing and informal relations with any of

the Qajar Persian ruling family. Sykes made his way down to Shiraz and Bushire, where he took ship for India to report to Army Intelligence at Simla. The Foreign Office took note.

The next year he was back again, this time to make a thorough survey of Persian Baluchistan. Farman Farma's father had only recently annexed it to Persia and Army Intelligence wanted to know where they could set up outposts to keep an eye on Russian moves towards the Persian Gulf, and where the Russians might be stopped. He was to find out where the mountain passes were and where water and fodder for the cavalry could be found, as well as the attitude of the Baluchis towards the British and the Persians.

Sykes and Surgeon Major Brazier Creagh, with a small escort of Indian cavalry and two Irish terriers, landed at Chahbahar, a large natural harbour and now an important Iranian naval base. They set off inland and started making inquiries. The head man of the first village they went to was 'black-bearded, swivel-eyed and evil of countenance' and tried to prevent the villagers from answering any of their questions or giving them any supplies. Sykes chucked him into the stream and he became more amenable. The country was rough and lawless and the Persian Government had very little hold on it. They visited the Sartip of Khash who told them that, although he never paid tax to anybody, he would far rather not pay British taxes, since they were fairer than Persian taxes.

Outside the desert town of Bampur they met Farman Farma, who was on a tour of the province with his two hundred armed horsemen. Brazier Creagh describes the meeting: "He gave us a most warm welcome and was particularly demonstrative towards Lt Sykes, kissing him. This performance from horseback before the entire crowd was singularly trying to Sykes, who was quite unprepared for such an outburst of feeling." Farman Farma summoned all the Baluchi chiefs, told them that Sykes was his friend and that they should give him all the information that he wanted. Sykes sounded him out discreetly on the idea of opening a British consulate in Kerman. The response was unexpected. Telling Sykes that he was worried that his property might be sequestered after his cousin Nasir ud-Din Shah died, Farman Farma gave him 25,000 rupees in cash and asked him to invest it for him in India. He also told him that he had a further £60,000 - £3m today - in the Imperial Bank of Persia which he would also like Sykes to invest for him. He sent Sykes back to his tent, escorted by "a long, lanky, cadaverous-looking *farrash* (footman), who turned out to be the Prince's chief executioner."

Sykes made his way back to England on leave and delivered his report. In October 1894, he was suddenly given ten days' notice to get ready to go out to Kerman and found a consulate.

He was 27 and unmarried. To keep house for him he took his elder sister Ella, who was a good traveller. After disembarking from the Baku ferry at Enzeli(,) they took post horses and picked their way along narrow muddy paths through the forests to the icy top of the mountain range that divides the humid Caspian coast from the dry Persian plateau. Down on the other side at Qazvin they took a carriage to Tehran, on one of the only two metalled roads in the country. A mounted Legation outrider met them outside the city walls and escorted them in at the gallop.

At the end of January they were ready to set off on the 500 mile ride to Kerman. They took nine servants and 50 mules to carry the baggage. Caravansarays were always filthy and verminous, so they camped all the way. Since Persian women did not ride, but travelled in very uncomfortable *takht-i ravans* (sedan platforms suspended between two mules), out of a sense of propriety Ella rode side saddle.

They rode across the desert, stopping for a while in the walled city of Yazd, where there was a branch of the Imperial Bank of Persia, and two months after setting off they reached Kerman. As was the custom, the governor sent out a reception party or *istiqlal* of some 200 riders to escort them to the new consulate.

Ella organised the servants and Sykes was sent a cavalry escort from India, because the roads were full of robbers. There was a police force of sorts, but they were worse than the robbers. In the mornings he worked at his desk and in the afternoons he and Ella went out riding, taking

with them any Persians who had called. The townsmen were poor riders, but the tribal khans were very good. Sykes took one of them tent-pegging. He did well at it and then showed Sykes the Persian trick of shooting an egg with a rifle at the gallop, standing up and turning in the saddle to shoot backwards – a 'Parthian shot'. This was all such fun that Sykes organised a weekly gymkhana for the khans. He got to know them well and they invited him out to visit them in their villages and took him shooting in the mountains.

Life passed thus agreeably until autumn turned to winter, when Ella felt that the time had come to light fires in the consulate, but Sykes would not let her. He told her that they were going on a winter expedition to demarcate an unmarked part of the Baluchi frontier and he wanted to harden her up for it.

They set off in January 1896, when it was blisteringly cold. The job had to be done in winter because surveying instruments could not work in the haze. Ella was in charge of the stores, and Farman Farma lent her fifty camels to carry them. 640 miles and forty days later, they reached the stream which marked the Indian frontier. There they were met by the English boundary commissioners, who had come up from India, and Farman Farma, who had travelled separately with the Persian commissioners. The Persian members of the Frontier Commission were very touchy about the English trampling all over their land, and became extremely obstructive about protocol, particularly the question as to which party should make the first call on the other. This was a serious question of face, not least because the Baluchi chiefs from both sides of the frontier were watching to see which side would give way. Farman Farma managed to find a suitably diplomatic formula to persuade the Persians to make the first call and the two Commissions proceeded northward together, laying boundary posts as they went.

A month later they had finished and Sykes decided to celebrate the occasion in his usual way - by organising a gymkhana. This unfortunately ended up in a free for all fight between the Persian soldiers and the Baluchis, which he had to settle by having two men from each side bastinadoed on the soles of the feet. Tempers were restored with a great banquet and the Frontier Commissioners made their way home. After a total journey of 2000 miles on her side saddle, Ella rode in to the British cantonments at Quetta with her brother. There her horse shied at a pram, the first wheeled vehicle that it had ever seen.

While Sykes was on leave in India, news came that the Shah had been assassinated. His heir, Mozaffar ud-Din Shah, was cousin and brother-in-law to Farman Farma - Sykes's friend.

In October 1897 Sykes was in the Gulf investigating gun-running into India through Persia and Afghanistan. While he was doing this, a Mr Graves of the Indian Telegraph Line was murdered in Baluchistan, so he set off on a gunboat with a punitive raiding party. They landed at a fishing village on the Makrân coast and set off inland by camel. The English sailors were not very good at riding camels and their Baluchi guides led them in circles. It was not a success, so Sykes sent them back and carried on without them on a fast riding camel. It rained every day, the going was extremely slippery and there was nothing to feed camels on except dates. When he reached the camp of the offending tribe, the elders told him that they were going to cut his throat. He replied that if they did so, the British would come down, cut all their heads off and build a tower of their skulls outside the Legation in Tehran. Impressed by this, they handed over Mr Graves' murderers and Sykes had them hanged, rather suitably, from the tallest telegraph post that he could find.

In the autumn of 1898 the Russians announced that they were going to open a consulate in Sistan [modern Zabol], very close to the Indian border. Curzon, who had just been appointed Viceroy and was now able to exercise his bold forward policy, told Sykes to go up from Kerman before the Russians got there. Sykes raced off across the desert with an escort of Indian cavalry and, just before the Russians arrived, raised his flag outside the little mud-walled town of Nosratabad. To relax after this adventure, Sykes went duck shooting on a reed raft on the nearby Hamun, the shallow lake about a hundred miles long that is fed by the snows of the Hindu Kush. With the arrival of the searingly hot 'wind of a hundred and twenty days' that blows down from the

Kara Kum desert, it was time to move north for the summer. Before leaving, he established a small post with an Indian doctor. He toured the district, showing the flag, and returned to Kerman. The Sistan consulate that was established shortly afterwards in this desolate spot, at its height, had a staff of 137.

In May 1900 Sykes sent a telegram from Kerman to Lord Salisbury, then Prime Minister and his own foreign secretary, to whom Sykes was reporting directly: "A party of three Russian surveyors, accompanied by Cossacks, has just reached Kerman. In reply to the Governor-General's polite query as to their object, they answered that Russia had territory in this direction and they wished to visit it. Comment is superfluous." Curzon had for years been trying to convince Lord Salisbury of the real threat of a Russian advance towards India. He had been impressed by Sykes's performance in Sistan and he now determined to attach him to his camp.

Sykes was now 34 and feeling the urgent need of a wife. There were no volunteers for life in the wilder parts of Persia until his cousins introduced him to Evelyn Seton, the daughter of a rather unconventional colonel who, after his wife had died aged 23, had brought up his daughters on a loose rein all over Europe. Evelyn was intrigued by the dashing Percy Sykes. His leave was limited and he bowled her over in short order.

Curzon arranged for Sykes to go back as consul to Kerman, reporting directly to him. The newly married couple sailed for Karachi, collected an escort of Sikh cavalry and took a very dirty date boat on its way up to Basrah, which dropped them off at Bandar Abbas. Evelyn was already pregnant and was now faced with the three hundred mile ride through very rough country up to Kerman. Once installed at Kerman Sykes left his now heavily pregnant wife to settle in while he toured the district and went shooting with the khans. When the baby was due he came back with a bottle of ether and a young English army doctor working on the new Indian Telegraph line. The young doctor, however, was so shocked by the business of childbirth that, when the moment came, he drank all the ether and Sykes had to chuck him out.

When the hot weather came Farman Farma gave the Sykeses the use of his garden at Mahan, a little way out of Kerman. Here Sykes showed an unexpected side to his character. There was more to him than there was to the typical English cavalry officer and at Mahan, which is still today a centre of Persian Sufism, he sat with the dervishes and studied Persian poetry and the Quran. Taking the occasional sociable pipe of opium with the Sheikhis, a liberal sect of Islam, he set about thoroughly imbuing himself with Persian culture.

In 1905 the British consul at Meshed in Khorasan had caused a scandal by taking a local woman to live with him and the Sykeses were sent at short notice to take over. The holy city of Meshed was the chief British listening post for Russian Turkistan. Thousands of pilgrims from all over the Shi'a Muslim world – from Mesopotamia, the Caucasus, Afghanistan and Central Asia – came to the shrine of the Imam Reza, and among them, unnoticed, came the spies.

So weak and bankrupt was the central government in Persia that Khorasan had become, in all but name, a Russian province. Sykes's arrival at Meshed coincided with news of the Japanese destruction of the Russian navy at Tsushima. The Persians suddenly saw that the Russians were not invincible and they gave Sykes a massive reception. The situation was soon complicated by the Constitutional movement. In 1906 a crowd of 14,000 protesters took refuge in the garden of the British legation at Tehran and demanded that the moribund Shah should grant a constitution, which he did, but the shock of it killed him. The first act of his son, Muhammad Ali Shah, was to cancel the constitution. Persia then split between the Constitutionalists, an uneasy alliance of clerics and European educated Young Persians – claiming support from the British – and the reactionary monarchists, who were supported by the Russians. There was rioting in Tehran and Tabriz. Meshed, however, was surprisingly quiet. The Public Record Office files show how Sykes kept the peace in Meshed at this sensitive time.

The first thing he did, characteristically, was to organise a Gymkhana and cavalry display. He invited the Constitutionalists, the Persian government officials, the Shrine officials, the

Russians and the Young Persians. These groups would never have got together in public and it was Sykes's prestige that enabled him to mediate between them. British prestige however, soon evaporated. The cause of the fall was the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, which split Persia into two zones. The fertile northern part of the country, down to Isfahan and Yazd, fell within the Russian zone, while the south eastern corner became the British zone. The rest of the country was to be neutral. This odd treaty had been brought about by the need to avoid any conflict between Russia and Britain in the east which might upset their alliance with the French against the rising power of Germany. The Persians were not consulted. The Constitutionalists, who had had such expectations of British support against Russia, were horrified and saw the treaty as a carve-up of their country. The extreme suspicion in which the Persians have held the British to this day dates from this Agreement.

In Meshed there was turmoil. The leading Shi'a *mujtahids* [doctors of Shi'a law] in Mesopotamia accused the Shah of handing over Khorasan to the Russians and called a *jihad* against him. The *mujtahids* did not know which way to turn; one day they were for the Constitution, the next day they were in favour of the Shah. Some were being patriotic and others were being paid. The Young Persians set up an independent assembly and the monarchists sent a gang of prostitutes to break it up. The Young Persians responded to this by paying two hundred gipsy women to fight it out with the prostitutes on the assembly steps. The trouble blew over, but then the new Russian consul Prince Dabizha, an old Persia hand, began to stir up trouble. Sykes was convinced that Dabizha's game was to cause disturbances in Meshed in order to justify bringing in Russian troops from across the border and occupy the whole of Khorasan. He would bring the Russians right up to the border with India – completely in breach of the Anglo-Russian Convention. But Sykes found it impossible to persuade the British Legation that this was the case.

Muhammad Ali Shah was finally pushed into granting a new Constitution. Having succeeded, the Young Persians of Meshed were, however, no angels. They asked a respectable merchant to donate funds to the new Assembly. When he politely asked them how they would spend the money, they shot him. They then tried to force the Governor-General to resign. To prevent Dabizha from taking advantage of all this anarchy, Sykes called a meeting in very dramatic circumstances, at the British Consulate. He gathered all the parties involved: the Governor-General, Dabizha, the two leading *mujtahids* of the Shrine, and the young revolutionaries, and brought them all to an agreement. It was at this point in his career, more than at any other, that Sykes showed his talent for reconciling apparently irreconcilable parties of Persians. It was a diplomatic triumph and Dabizha had to back down.

In the spring of 1909 the Nationalists forced Muhammad Ali Shah to abdicate. He left Persia for Odessa and was succeeded by his son Ahmad Shah, who was only fourteen at the time. Two years later Dabizha recruited one Yusef Herati, "a notorious ruffian", to organise riots in support of the exiled Shah, who was of course a Russian puppet. Muhammad Ali soon landed in Persia and sent telegrams to the Governor-General of Meshed, and the head of the Shrine, telling them to surrender. The worried chief of the Persian telegraph office brought the telegrams to Sykes, who told him not to deliver them. Sykes was tapping the Russian consulate telephone throughout and, in a bizarre twist to the story, discovered that Muhammad Ali had promised Dabizha a large sum of money if he retrieved his throne.

The British government protested to St Petersburg about Dabizha and the Russian Foreign Secretary told him to stop agitating for the ex-Shah. Dabizha ignored the order and got his man Yusef Herati to collect a huge armed mob inside the Shrine, and they then demanded the return of Muhammad Ali.

The next day, on 31st March 1912, in defiance of any sort of logic, Russian artillery bombarded the shrine, the most sacred site in Persia. The infantry then moved in, shot all those who could not find cover and looted the Shrine of its treasure, its carpets and its priceless manuscripts.

Extraordinarily, there was no reaction from the Persians to this sacrilege. One would have expected them to cut every Russian throat, but they were totally cowed by the scale of the outrage. The motive for the Russian bombardment was a mystery until Sykes's agent inside the Russian consulate told him that Dabizha had done it in a fit of fury at being thwarted in his attempts to restore the exiled Shah. Sykes then discovered that Muhammad Ali had signed a secret treaty with the Russians, agreeing to hand over the whole of Khorasan to them. The Legation refused to believe it until Sykes produced a copy of it. This finally persuaded the Foreign Office that the Russians had all along regarded their agreement with the British as no more than a piece of paper.

In 1915 Sykes was sent to relieve George Macartney, the consul at Kashgar in Chinese Sinkiang, who had had no home leave for twelve years. Turkish speaking Kashgar was a sensitive listening post between Russia, China and India. During the Great War, Turkey used Chinese Turkistan as a base to stir up the Muslims on the borders of India and in Russian Turkistan. Evelyn, with her string of small children, saw it as beyond the call of duty to go, so he sent for Ella to come out and keep house for him again.

Social life among the Europeans in Kashgar was limited. There were a dozen Russians and some gloomy and teetotal Swedish missionaries. The Russians were extremely convivial, although a trifle trying for Ella to entertain, since their idea of the proper hour to end a decent dinner party was at five in the morning.

It was not long before a party of Turks arrived, heading for Afghanistan. Sykes and the Russian consul, acting together, arranged for the local governor to arrest them. This tiny move in the 'Great Game' amounted to no more than the swatting of a passing fly. Without resolute action it might have led to an anti-British uprising in India. These Turks were not horse traders.

In May 1915 the Russian Cossacks on the border arrested another party of Turks. Two months later the Turks tried again. This time they came to open a religious school, but the Kashgar merchants were against the idea of education that they could not control. They paid the mullas to denounce the Turks and forced the Chinese to close the school. The bazaar seethed with rumours of Turkish plots.

In June of 1915 Sykes took Ella up into the Pamirs, for there were passes into Russia to be mapped. Russia was an ally for the moment but might not always remain so. They travelled in high country. The valley floors were higher than the top of the Alps and there were Marco Polo sheep to be shot. Sykes's stalker was a splendid Kirghiz who took Sykes off for three days and they came back with a pile of Poli strapped to their yaks. Ella was left in camp to search for edelweiss and gentians.

Riding yaks, they went on up to the foot of the glacier of Muztagh Ata, led by their Kirghiz guide. Further than this the guide refused to go, for the Kirghiz believed Muztagh Ata to be haunted by fairy camels of supernatural whiteness, and by mysterious drummers, which were probably just the sound of rocks shattering in the cold. The guide was keen to get down and led Ella's yak hurtling down precipitous scree to the bottom of the valley. This time the normally imperturbable Ella was really afraid that her yak would fall and hurl itself and her to destruction, but it never lost its footing.

In November the Macartneys returned and the Sykeses made their way back through Russia to England and the War that had broken out in Europe. To his frustration, he was put in charge of troop movements at Southampton. Later, a call went out for interpreters for the Indian troops at the front and he was sent to France, still as a non-combatant. In the following year a call came for him to return to Persia.

In 1908 a Yorkshireman had found oil in the mountains of the south-west of Persia. In 1909 the Royal Navy had converted from coal to oil, so that when war broke out in 1914 the security of the oilfields of south Persia had become of some importance. About two years before the war, the Germans started plotting with the Turks to stir up an Islamic revolt against the British in India and sent agents into Persia to stir up the democrats and nationalists against the British. Their most

effective agent was Wassmuss. In November 1915 Wassmuss got the gendarmes of Shiraz to arrest the entire British colony - Consul, Bank manager and all - and march them down the mountains towards Bushire. He met them at the foot of the mountains, where he was living in a mud fort belonging to the chief of the Tangistanis - a tribe of outlaws who had always resisted any official Persian or British presence in their hills and welcomed Wassmuss's assistance - and there he kept them prisoner for nine months. Something had to be done and the only person with sufficient knowledge of Persia to do it was Sir Percy Sykes.

In March 1916 Sykes was sent out to raise a force to restore order in the South and clear out the German agents. The force was to be called the South Persia Rifles (SPR), for it was to be theoretically a Persian force, not a British force. Although the Persian Prime Minister agreed to it, the Democrats and nationalists, who were supported by the Germans, were, not surprisingly, opposed to it. Sykes landed at Bandar Abbas, with three British officers, three Indian officers, twenty Indian NCOs and a cavalry escort of twenty-five Central India Horse. With his old friend the local governor he set up a base camp and announced that he was raising an army. The local landowners, who of course all knew Sykes and were fed up with all the tribal raiding, were delighted. Within days they had sent him three hundred men.

Word spread quickly that 'the Great Consul' was recruiting and the size of the force grew in the telling. The Governor of Bandar Abbas, as he took his pipe of opium in the evening with his friends, multiplied the 300 to 3000, and his son the Governor of Minab up the road multiplied them again to 30,000. It was all a superb bluff and the German agents, who had kicked out the British bankers and consuls from Yazd, Kerman and Bam(,) fled to join Wassmuss at Shiraz.

The SPR was rapidly built up, with supporting troops from the Indian Army, and set off inland. Three months after Sykes had landed, they reached Kerman. The Telegraph, the Imperial Bank of Persia and the Consulate opened their doors again. A large base was established and recruitment to the SPR began in earnest, with a plan to raise 11,000 men. With Kerman secure Sykes was ready to head for Shiraz, which was the real trouble spot. But first he marched his force to Isfahan in the Russian zone. And there, in the main square, he held a huge joint parade with the Russians, with spectacular gallop-pasts by the Indian cavalry and the Cossacks. He had a good political reason for this: The Persians had been in the habit of playing the Russians off against the English for years and this was a very public demonstration that the two were now allies.

The British Legation put pressure on the Shah to appoint Sykes's old friend Farman Farma, who was now Prime Minister, as Governor-General of Shiraz. And so it was that in November 1916, after a roundabout march of a thousand miles from Kerman, and 23 years after their first meeting, Sykes entered Shiraz with Prince Farman Farma once more at his side.

Three problems faced them. The most immediate one was what to do with the six thousand remaining members of the gendarmerie. They had not been paid for months, were undisciplined, full of pro-German nationalists, and would soon be forced to turn to highway robbery just to live. Sykes took the bold decision to take them into the SPR. The second problem was the German agents in Shiraz. Farman Farma quickly arrested them all, except for Wassmuss, who was something of a Houdini. The third problem was the Qashqai tribe. They spent the winter around Firuzabad, to the south of Shiraz and in the spring they came up through Shiraz to summer quarters in the mountains below Isfahan. They lived by preying on the settled villages they passed through and by exacting protection money from the merchants bringing goods up from Bushire. This road was no more than a precipitous mule track through a series of mountain ranges and was ideal bandit country. The Qashqai chief could call on 5000 armed horsemen and had no interest in either the British or the Persians imposing their law on his territory - and Wassmuss was his friend.

The SPR managed to put an end to tribal raiding over most of the province of Fars, but they never got control of the road from Bushire to Shiraz, which was controlled at the Shiraz end by the Qashqai chief Saulat ud-Dowleh. Sykes had to come to an understanding with him and went out to

meet him. They arrived at a 'friendly agreement', not unconnected with money, which promised to improve matters. Farman Farma however, was not included in this arrangement and he promptly protested to the Persian Government against Saulat's presumption in dealing directly with the British and at the same time denounced him to the Democrat party as being in British pay. The Persian government then encouraged sedition in the SPR and told Saulat to wipe them out. Wassmuss came up from the coast and went to work on Saulat as well. Nonetheless, the SPR and the Indian troops, albeit at great expense, managed to keep control of Shiraz and suppress tribal raiding in the province, blowing up robber forts as they went. The official history gives the details, but there is one incident which it does not cover fully and is worth recounting, because it shows the importance of having proper local knowledge.

It occurred in May 1918 and it led to full-scale tribal war. There was an SPR garrison, the last post on the road to Bushire, at the village of Khan-e Zenyan, nineteen miles west of Shiraz and it was commanded by one Captain Will. He arrested a small party of passing Qashqai because he thought they had stolen two donkeys from the SPR. The Qashqai khan, according to custom, sent a courteous message asking for their release, but Captain Will, ignorant of local custom, discourteously refused. The Qashqai surrounded the post to rescue their kinsmen. An SPR force came out from Shiraz, killed fifteen of the Qashqai and took thirty-six prisoners, including the khan's two nephews. This was too much for the Qashqai. Saulat moved his camp close to Shiraz and sent five thousand armed horsemen to surround the SPR post. In Shiraz itself the Democrats instigated the mullas to start anti-British disturbances and proclaim throughout the mosques, the tea-houses and the bazaars that the Qashqai had defeated the British. To the south-east, the Sheikh of Firuzabad declared a jihad.

This was the worst crisis of Sykes's career. He sent out 1600 Baluchi Infantry and Burma Mounted Rifles, and for fourteen hours they fought the 5000 Qashqai until Saulat retreated. He had lost 200 dead and about 700 wounded, with two British officers and eighteen Indians killed. The SPR garrison at Khan-e Zenyan mutinied and Captain Will and his sergeant were killed. All of this had been over two donkeys! As always in Persia, there are several explanations for this extraordinary incident. Sykes was convinced, almost to the stage of paranoia, that the whole thing had been set up by the Persian Minister of the Interior, who was being paid by the Germans. He also believed that Saulat had engineered the whole affair to frighten the British into paying him an even bigger subsidy.

The truth of the matter, which came out fifty years after the event in an interview with Saulat's son, was quite different. His story was that the Qashqai were on migration with their women and flocks and were clearly not a raiding party. Far from stealing the two donkeys, they had come to return them. If only Captain Will had come to an arrangement over the donkeys and treated the khan with proper respect, there would have been no trouble. But far more serious than the insult to the khan was that the fact that the SPR had laid hands on some of the Qashqai women and Saulat's wife had sworn to divorce him unless he took revenge. The women and the hotheads had pushed him into action, but he could have held them back if only the British had just left him and his territory alone. He just could not see what business the British had on his territory.

The SPR carried on policing and building roads until all operations in Persia were brought to an end by the influenza outbreak of 1918, which wiped out thousands. Everyone was affected and the SPR lost many men. The war had come to an end and the country just collapsed.

The occupation of South Persia by the SPR was controversial and heavily criticised. What had Sykes achieved? He had dispelled the German threat, and highway robbery, which had been a real problem, had been all but eliminated. He had created a disciplined force for internal security, and, in a country where there had been only mule tracks, he had organised the SPR engineers to build one thousand miles of motorable roads. As the war was over, London decided that there was no more need for Sykes so he was recalled. On his way home he passed through Kerman for the last time. The SPR garrison put on a parade for him, but this time the crowds did not turn out. The mood had changed and the nationalists now had the upper hand. It was time for him to leave.

Having made an enemy of Curzon, Sykes found that his career was at an end. He spent the rest of his life in semi-academic pursuits, writing books on history and early travellers in the East, and giving lectures. For a time he took his family to live in Switzerland and France, where life was cheaper. In 1931 they returned to England, where he divided his time between golf and the Athenaeum. He served as Honorary Secretary of the Royal Central Asian Society. In 1940, at the end of a lecture that he had given to a joint meeting of the Society and the East India Association, Sir Michael O'Dwyer, an ex-governor of the Punjab, was assassinated by one Udham Singh.² Sykes, aged 73, charged at the Indian and floored him, holding him pinned until he could be arrested. The newspapers of the following day gave glowing tributes to his heroism, but he was mortified that he had been unable to save O'Dwyer.

In 1945, on a very hot day, Sykes came up to the Athenaeum from Sunningdale. There were no taxis, so he decided to walk from Waterloo, carrying his bag. Close to his club he collapsed and, a few hours later, died in hospital. He was able to ring his wife and tell her that he was grateful for having had a good life. After his death his family endowed the Sykes Medal in his memory, to be awarded by the Royal Central Asian Society for contribution towards understanding of the East.

Sir Percy Sykes never ceased to profess his admiration for the people and culture of Persia. In none of his writings, whether private or public, did he ever disparage the Persians, as did so many of his contemporaries.³ On the contrary, he loved Persia. After all, it had given him a home for the best part of 25 years.

REFERENCES

1. Peter Hopkirk's books on Central Asia and the 'Great Game' include *The Great Game* (1990), *On Secret Service East of Constantinople* (1994), and *Setting the East Ablaze* (1984).
2. See 'Murder at Caxton Hall – A postscript' in *Asian Affairs*, June 2002, p.244.
3. See Sykes, Sir Percy. *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*. John Murray, London 1901; *A History of Persia*, 2 Volumes. Macmillan, London, 1930 (3rd edition) (in Society library).
See also Sykes, Ella, C. *Through Persia on Side Saddle*. Innes & Co., London, 1898 and Sykes, Ella, C. *Persia and its People*. Methuen, 1910, London. (in Society library).