

HIM AND HIS FRIENDS*

Paul Foot

Among the guests of the Shah of Iran during the celebrations in Persepolis of the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian Empire was a right-wing Tory MP now a lord called Jock Bruce-Gardyne. Writing about the occasion in *The Sunday Telegraph* some ten years later, Mr Bruce-Gardyne recalled one of his most convivial companions:

Several years ago, I enjoyed a memorable junket as the guest of the late Shah of Persia. Dr David Owen was one of that company. As we journeyed to Persepolis, I became more and more worried. For the more we chatted between the helpings of caviar about the state of the world. . . the less we seemed to find to disagree about.

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Put Bruce-Gardyne in a television studio in Britain with David Owen and there would be instant controversy. They would disagree, passionately, about almost everything. What then made the difference on that sumptuous journey to Persepolis? Mr Bruce-Gardyne gives the clue. The two men were arguing *in between helpings of caviar*. Caviar, as is widely recognised, is a universal healer. It soothes and unites. In particular, it concentrates the minds of party guests on the exceptional kindness, goodness and brilliance of their hosts.

In 1971, when the 'junket' to Persepolis was organised, the Shah of Iran was embarking on one of the twentieth century's most blatant exercises in megalomania and tyranny. The sudden surge in Iran's oil revenues seemed to remove all limits to his two central ambitions: to enrich his own family, and to build the most powerful arsenal on earth, outside the United States and Russia. The following year, United States President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger visited the Shah, appropriately enough on their way back from peace talks in Russia. There, as representatives not merely of their country's government but also of its armaments industry, they wrote the Shah a blank cheque for any American arms he wanted to buy. In February 1973, the Pentagon revealed that the Shah had contracted to buy two thousand million pounds worth of arms from the United States, a figure which represented about

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a quarter of the entire national income of Iran. The American arms manufacturer Grunman spared no pains to win the Shah to the delights of their new jet fighter, the Tomcat. In his book, *The Arms Bazaar*, Anthony Sampson (now a colleague of Dr Owen's in the Social Democratic Party) described the scene near Washington when the Shah was shown the plane by Grunman:

The Tomcat performed amazing acrobatics touching down in front of the Shah and then shooting up again like a rocket. The Grunman men observed the Shah's delight as he illustrated the swoop with his hands.

The contract was signed, naturally not without a little bit of corruption. Houshang Levi, an 'arms lobbyist', got his cut, a standard 28 million dollars. The Shah's zest for more weapons obliged him to help himself more and more liberally to his country's straining coffers. As opposition grew to his policies, he redoubled his already monstrous power. His secret police, SAVAK, modelled itself on the KGB both for efficiency in detecting dissidents and in ruthlessness in dealing with them. Torture of political and religious dissenters was widespread, and well documented.

Throughout this period, however, and for years after it, the Shah's regime was praised in the West, especially in Britain and the United States, as an example of liberal reformism. This analysis was arrived at partly out of strategic necessity, partly through the work of a highly effective propaganda machine, based in the Iranian Embassies. The Shah, who was a good judge of character within his ruling class, preferred to choose his top civil servants, ministers and diplomats from the liberal intelligentsia, which was renowned across the world for its culture and charm.

From such a background came Amir Abbas Hoveyda, the Shah's most long-serving prime minister, who made a special effort to surround himself with intelligent and cultured young men. Parviz Radji was 29 when he went to work for Hoveyda in 1965. He had a good Economics degree from Cambridge and had been educated exclusively in Britain and America. Unlike many of his colleagues, he was not enormously rich, but he was handsome, charming, intelligent and quickly successful. After ten years in Hoveyda's office, he went to the United Nations, where he worked for the Shah's twin sister, Princess Ashraf. He helped to build up the image of the Iranian Royal family as 'progressive'. The Princess, for instance, became known as a champion of women's rights and sponsored several large initiatives in the field of birth control. The International Planned Parenthood Federation, an impeccably progressive organisation, for instance, got a lot of bounty from the Shah's family. Such cosmetics seen, especially with hindsight, absurdly thin, but they were enough to impress a receptive British and American upper class.

Mr Radji's book is an account of the three years he served as Iranian

Ambassador in London from 1976 to the collapse of the Shah's regime in 1979. It is continuously absorbing, chiefly because it betrays the secrets of the ruling class. It shows what high and important people really say and think. These secrets are made all the more interesting by the tensions in Mr Radji's character. He was no hack of the Shah, at least not in his thoughts. The book constantly slips into self-reproach, which is rare enough in the world of Ambassadors. Deep down, Radji despises the Shah, and hates his own obsequiousness towards the Royal Family. It is as though he knows that his country is plunging to ruin under a corrupt and brutal regime, but steadfastly tells himself that it is his job to stick up for that regime, whatever his private feelings.

By all accounts, not just his own, Mr Radji was very good at this. His first duty was to make himself at home with high society, particularly with Royalty. As a new boy, he made the odd mistake:

There is an invitation to a Garden Party at Buckingham Palace in the afternoon. The invitation says 'morning dress or lounge suit'. Turn up in the latter, only to discover that in the Queen's tea tent I am a sartorial catastrophe, as everyone else, including the Prime Minister, James Callaghan, is wearing morning dress.

On another occasion, he dared to ask Princess Alexandra, with whom he was dining, to have a drink with him at a fashionable nightclub. 'Angus, being basically tribal, is quite jealous', she replies, rather sadly, in a reference to her husband, the big businessman Angus Ogilvy. Ogilvy himself later impresses on the Ambassador that the Royal Family are a great deal more use to men of money than in purely ceremonial ways:

He (Ogilvy) mentions more than once that if ever I should wish to see someone in the government through other than my formal diplomatic channels, he would be very pleased to arrange such informal contacts.

All the Royal Family, needless to say, felt a bond of strong solidarity with one of the few really powerful kings left on earth, and so Mr Radji found himself the object of special royal attention. Princess Margaret was a regular guest at the magnificent feasts at the Iranian Embassy. When she came to dinner on one of the Ambassador's first nights in office, she brushed aside his apologies about demonstrators outside who were chanting unseemly slogans such as 'The Shah is a Murderer!' She was used to it, she explained. In America, her official functions were constantly being hampered by demonstrators on Ireland. 'But then, of course, you have torture, and we don't', she added, sympathetically.

This sort of thing shocked the sensitive Mr Radji. But he soon got used to it, particularly as his duties brought him into close contact again and again with the Conservative Party, which was then in opposition. At a

dinner party at the home of the Tory MP, Eldon Griffiths, the Ambassador heard Lord Aldington, a former Tory MP and one of Britain's most powerful businessmen, launch a ferocious attack on the American President, Jimmy Carter, for 'introducing human rights as a salient principle of his foreign policy'. He continued:

It is naive to the point of stupidity to expect the world to comply with a set of moral values that have come to prevail in certain parts of Europe and America, but only as a result of a long process of historical evolution,

The same sophisticated view of human rights was taken at another dinner, thrown by another Tory MP, at which Mr Radji, who had by then rehearsed a rather moving speech defending human rights, denounced the practice of torture. 'Perry' Worsthorne, the elegant *Sunday Telegraph* columnist, took him to task:

He says he is surprised to hear me applying 19th century English liberal standards in my defence of Iran, when *no* defence is necessary. Quite the contrary, praise is due.

At Mr Radji's first meeting with Mrs Thatcher, she reminded him, at first sight, of a 'priest's wife'. Almost at once, she was ranting on about the need to bring back the rope for terrorists ('not very priest-like' Radji comments). He noticed, too, how solidarity with the Shah was instinctive in *all* Conservatives, whether supporters of Mrs Thatcher or supporters of Edward Heath (who went out of his way to be kind to the Ambassador, and to impress on him how much he admired the Shah). From time to time, Mr Radji expressed his irritation that there was so little criticism among the Tories of the Shah's excesses. At a 'stag dinner' for bright young Tory gentlemen at the Turf Club, thrown by Peter Walker, a former senior Cabinet Minister under Heath, the conversation was 'fast-paced'. 'Peter Walker', Mr Radji comments, 'strikes me as a bit too strongly pro-Shah'.

Mr Radji was more at ease among politicians of the social democratic stamp. Among them, to his intense surprise and relief, he found support for the Shah even more gushing and generous. An early guest at the Embassy was Lady Falkender, Rasputine to the former Labour prime minister Harold Wilson, who had left office only a few months before Mr Radji arrived. Lady Falkender hated caviar—so the first course had to be changed. But she made up for it by saying how much Harold Wilson admired the Shah, and she also told the Ambassador that Martin Ennals (the Secretary of Amnesty, which was relentlessly pursuing charges of torture in Iran), and his brothers were 'Trotskyites'. 'You shouldn't have anything to do with them', the Labour peeress told the Ambassador.

Later, Mr Radji met Harold Wilson himself, inevitably at another dinner party, this one thrown by the publisher, Lord Weidenfeld (ennobled, of course, thanks to Wilson and Falkender's patronage). Wilson recalled one of his 'great sayings' for the Ambassador's benefit: 'I once described the Shah', he said, 'as one of the world's great redistributive leaders'.

Lord Weidenfeld also showed himself to be the last in a long line of British radical publishers when he dined alone with the Ambassador at the Iranian Embassy. He suggested a book on the Shah—'A kind of *Red Star over China* that would put across the Shah's point of view in the same way as Edgar Snow's had done for Mao.' Only someone with Lord Weidenfeld's intense commitment to socialism could bracket the multi-millionaire dynast and hereditary autocrat with the Chinese revolutionary leader.

Again and again, Mr Radji was obliged to his fellow Cambridge graduate and friend, David Owen. The sensitive doctor had not forgotten his journey to Persepolis at the beginning of the decade. He and the entire Labour Government were, throughout the period, unequivocally loyal to the Shah and his regime. When the Ambassador complained to David Owen that the BBC broadcasts to Iran were unduly hostile to the regime, Owen agreed at once, complaining that he did not have the power to stop the broadcasts. Even at the end, when the Shah's regime was toppling, the enthusiasm of David Owen for the dictator did not waver. When Radji complimented him on making a pro-Shah speech in opposition to Labour Party policy, Owen smiled a supercilious smile and said that the National Executive of the Labour Party 'should be told to shut up from time to time'. But then the smile vanished and he admitted he was worried by the hostility to his remarks on Iran. Never since Persepolis had he imagined that opposition to the Shah might consist of anything more than a handful of saboteurs and Russian agents.

Two striking pictures painted by the Ambassador symbolise the attitude of the Labour Government and its supporters towards the Iranian dictatorship. At yet another dinner (the whole book is one long banquet), he found himself next to Judith Hart, champion of the Movement for Colonial Freedom, who was then Minister for Overseas Development. Mr Radji remonstrated with her about her sponsorship of the Committee Against Repression in Iran:

To my delight she blushes visibly, and asks whether her *name still* appears on the letterhead. When I confirm that it does, she says: 'It is wrong for a government Minister's name to be there, and it must be removed.'

And removed it was. With its removal, the principle was firmly established that for a Labour Minister to be seen to be against repression is a clear breach of the basic tenets of the Constitution and parliamentary

democracy.

The other story concerns the philosopher Stuart Hampshire, author of a book on Spinoza and of books and articles championing a more democratic society. Dr Hampshire was Warden of Wadham College, Oxford, when Ambassador Radji and Princess Ashraf arrived to inspect a library which the Princess, in her role as intellectual and reformer had financed. The place was thronged with demonstrators, some in hoods in case they were recognised as Iranian students and deported into the care of SAVAK. The royal car was stuck in an alley and pelted with eggs. Even inside the college, the chants of the demonstrators completely ruined the occasion. Mr Radji wrote:

Warden Hampshire looked distinctly unhappy, afflicted as it were, with a social responsibility from which he couldn't rid himself soon enough.

Spinoza, no doubt, would have enjoyed the Warden's discomfiture, and might perhaps have asked why he had allowed himself to be compromised in this way; and why the whole academic community had not risen in protest against accepting money from so hideously tainted a source.

Ambassador Radji's job was not completely taken up with royalty and politicians. His main aim was to improve the image of his country and its dictator, and therefore most of his business was with the press. The tremendous care and concern afforded to every word written or broadcast about his country was astonishing. The smallest article, even in *Private Eye*, was a matter for long telegrams between London and Teheran. Indeed, on one of the two audiences granted to Mr Radji in the course of this book, the Shah himself was asked to give judgment on how to react to a snippet of gossip in *Private Eye*.

The most frequent guests at the Ambassador's table at Princes Gate, then, were journalists, usually 'friendly' journalists, but often ostensibly 'hostile' journalists as well. Lord Chalfont and Lord George-Brown had written often in support of the Shah before, and they were always welcome friends. Frank Giles, of *The Sunday Times*, was another reliable lunch guest. A typical entry about another great fan of the Shah reads like this:

Go to Homayoun Mazandi's for dinner. Simon Fraser and his pretty wife, David Frost and Lady Milford Haven are among the faces I recognise. An enormous house, opulently decorated, tons of caviar and rivers of Dom Perignon. At dinner, David Frost speaks to me about his love for Iran and admiration for HIM.

The word 'HIM' is printed like this throughout the book to designate the Shah. Missing a short note at the beginning, I read two thirds of the book believing this 'HIM' to be an exercise in disrespectful satire by the

Ambassador. Then I found the real reason for it: HIM stands for His Imperial Majesty.

Anthony Howard, then editor of the *New Statesman*, accepted invitations to lunch at the Iranian Embassy during this period, and boasted to Parviz Radji that he would not have accepted such an invitation to the South African Embassy. Even more surprisingly, David Pallister, one of the *Guardian's* more challenging journalists, was also to be found there. He gave as good as he got at lunch, it is true, but the thrust of the public relations approach was to gain a journalist's confidence through *hospitality*. However hard a journalist tries, it is very hard to remain independent, let alone hostile, to anyone after you have waded through 'tons of caviar and rivers of Dom Perignon' at that person's expense. Indeed, the discussion and angst about *Private Eye* in the Ambassador's diaries are caused by puzzlement about how to proceed. *Who* could be asked to lunch, for instance? Who could be approached for a civilised argument? When the Ambassador told the Shah that he didn't think *Private Eye* could be 'bought', he was not speaking literally. Except in rare cases, journalists were not *bought* by cash offers, or even with freebees to Persepolis. They were, however, available for agreeable lunches and civilised parties at which questions such as corruption or torture could be discussed in a civilised manner. More often than not, this approach paid off handsomely, to the Ambassador's huge delight:

A favourable article in the *Guardian*, not by Liz Thurgood, entitled: The Shah shoves Iran towards Freedom. There are references to improvements in the condition of political prisoners, an end to torture, and a greater climate of political freedom all of which puts me in a good frame of mind when Parviz Mina takes me to the BP tent at Wimbledon for lunch, and then to watch the men's finals. In four thrilling sets, Borg obliterates Connors.

That entry, for July 8, 1978, perfectly symbolises the life to which Mr Radji was growing accustomed, when suddenly and unannounced, the people, who had played no part in any of his dramas, crudely pushed onto the stage. They toppled the Shah, killed Hoveyda, and would certainly have killed Parviz Radji if he had returned to Iran. This impertinent intervention forced Mr Radji to reflect on the end of 'the aura of elitist authority and importance which has glimmered, as if by divine light, round the heads of those of us who represented Iran's ruling classes for as long as I can remember'. He himself had lost that aura and was forced to contemplate life as a 'stateless refugee'.

But in Britain and the other countries whose governments sustained the Shah through the most corrupt and brutal years of his dictatorship the aura persists, almost unaffected by its grisly end in Iran. There are those who seriously argue that the British ruling class, worn down by long years of democracy, parliamentary questions, trade unions, national councils

for civil liberties and the like, have lost a lot of their arrogance, confidence, and self-importance. Certainly, if their official statements are anything to go by, they seem to have developed a sensitivity which would have shocked their ancestors.

The great value of this book is that it banishes such myths. The ruling class is quoted as its members talk to themselves and their fellow rulers overseas without the slightest fear that anything they say will be repeated. The old prejudices and the old arrogance strides out of their cages as confident, as corrupt and as barbaric as ever. Of course the British ruling class is against torture, but there are times when it must be defended. Of course the British ruling class does not like dictators who rely on one-party states. But there are times when they must be singled out for praise.

There are those, too, much more numerous, who argue that these prejudices can be changed and the havoc they cause averted by the existing institutions: that a free Parliament, a free press, and all the lobbying organisations which go with them are themselves powerful enough to roll back the tide of reaction.

Such people should read Mr Radji's book and reflect on the role played in it by the Labour Government. It was, curiously enough, not Old Corrupt Labour upon which the forces of reaction in Iran relied. It was the new, sensitive, 'civil libertarians' who bowed to tyranny. As David Owen inveighed against the BBC for daring to broadcast critical reports to the Iranian people, and Judith Hart ripped her name off the letterhead of the Committee Against Repression in Iran, the government which they represented became, as Mr Radji graphically describes, a bastion against the people of Iran and, a haven in which the shipwrecked agents of the Shah could shelter from the storm. Just as the Labour Government could so swiftly jettison so many of its principles and resolutions, so too could the press which is meant to safeguard freedoms be used again and again to ditch them.

Parviz Radji's riveting diaries show that very little has changed up top. The loss of empire has, if anything, made the British ruling class more greedy and cunning. As long as its opponents play the game by the book, it remains as confident as ever that it can hang on to its property and its power. That may seem a pessimistic conclusion, but curiously the end of the book is not pessimistic at all. By then, the Iranian masses had taken to the streets, breaking every rule that was ever made. The ruling class, in Iran, and in Britain and the United States as well, lost both cunning and confidence and blundered about in blind despair. Perhaps the most hopeful quotation comes from no less a person than HMQ (Her Majesty the Queen). Shaking hands sadly with Mr Radji at the time when the Shah was preparing to leave Iran, she murmured, perhaps with a trace of foreboding: 'It all happened so *suddenly*.'