

## **IN MEMORIAM**

**Lawrence Paul Elwell-Sutton (1912-1984)**

**Floreeda Safiri**

The death of Lawrence Paul Elwell-Sutton, Professor Emeritus of Persian, on September 2, 1984 in Edinburgh, has sadly deprived the field of Iranian and Islamic studies of one of its dedicated, serious scholars. Elwell-Sutton was born in 1912 at Ballylickey, Bantry Bay, County Cork. After his secondary education at Winchester, he entered the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, to study Arabic and Persian and graduated in 1934, with a first class Honors degree in Arabic. In 1935 he went to Iran working for the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in Abadan. He remained on this job until 1938. His familiarity with the company's history and its complex relations with the Iranian government was to provide the basis for the work that he is most readily associated with, at least in Iranian circles: *Persian Oil: A Study in Power Politics* (1955), which has been translated into Russian and Chinese.

In the interval between 1938 and 1943 he worked for the BBC in London as a specialist in Persian and as editor of the "Arabic Listener." He returned to Iran in 1943 to take up the position of press attaché at the British Embassy in Tehran and held this post until 1947. His impressions of these years, notably of the Azerbaijan crisis and his personal reflections on its significance for the Iranian central government and the monarchy, were instructive and interesting to any student of modern Iranian history who was fortunate to have worked with him. It was in 1952 that he was offered a lectureship in Persian at the University of Edinburgh, where he taught for the next 30 years rising to a personal chair before retiring in 1982. He lived long enough to witness the presentation of a volume of collected articles on Qajar history, published in his honor.

Elwell-Sutton was, in many ways, a remarkable scholar and individual. Not only did he have an excellent knowledge of Arabic and Persian, he was also adept in most ancient and modern Near and Middle Eastern languages. His students could

learn Pahlavi and Armenian from him while benefiting from his various major and minor specialized fields of interest in Persian and Islamic studies. These included Arabic and Persian literature, prosody, Shi'i thought and history, the political history of modern Iran, Islamic astronomy and astrology, and Persian folklore. His projects on the two latter subjects remain unfinished. He was also an epigraphist, a fine calligrapher, and a keen amateur actor and producer to boot! His books, twelve in all, and the hundred or so articles which he wrote, display his rare ability to move with apparent ease and actual competence between these wide-ranging interests.

His *Persian Metres* (1976), is an outstanding contribution to the field of Persian literature while his *Persian Oil* is a standard work of reference on the Mosaddeq era and was one of the few works of its time to demonstrate a clear understanding of and sympathy for the Iranian side, in the nationalization crisis. In Iranian eyes, this scholar's outlook on the politics of modern Iran appears to be somewhat puzzling. His book on Reza Shah is an uncritical appreciation of the man and his authoritarian rule. His *Persian Oil* is supportive of the liberal democratic quests of Mosaddeq's government, while in later years, he was to display, especially in his book reviews, a marked intolerance toward the literary and scholarly output of Iranians critical of the rule of the two Pahlavis. These apparently contradictory attitudes may be explained if we take into account Elwell-Sutton's deep sympathy and active support for the cause of nationalism and nationalist leaders so long as he believed that the leadership was moving the nation along the path of development and modernization. From this perspective, he could sympathize with the constitutionalist leaders of the early part of the century as well as Reza Shah, Mosaddeq, and the last Pahlavi ruler by placing them within the same conceptual mold. One of the offshoots of this position, which his students, if not others, benefited from, was his tireless efforts to convince them that explanations for such phenomena as the coup of 1921, the nature of Reza Shah's rule, the crisis of constitutional government of the '40s and '50s and later, and the Iranian Revolution must, above all, be sought first through an investigation of the local rather than the external scene. By extension, he was quick to condemn any interference by external powers in the affairs of countries such as Iran,

just as he was highly critical of the British government's lack of response to Scottish nationalist aspirations.

Lastly, he was a devoted teacher who was always available to his students and alert to their queries and problems. He was also a conscientious correspondent and maintained his longstanding contacts with friends among prominent Iranian scholars, such as Bozorg Alavi, whom he was so glad to see in Edinburgh in this past year. He was a quiet, highly talented scholar, who was devoted to Iran and who did much to keep Persian studies alive in Edinburgh.

He leaves behind his wife, Alison, and six children. We extend our condolences to them.

**Floreeda Safiri**