

In Memoriam

Ehsan Yarshater (3 April 1920–2 September 2018): Doyen of Iranian Studies



Ehsan Yarshater, the Hagop Kevorkian Professor Emeritus of Iranian Studies, a longtime director of the Center for Iranian Studies at Columbia University, and the founding editor of the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, passed away in Fresno, California, on 2 September 2018. A human being of outstanding qualities and a scholar of exemplary erudition and attention to exactitude and detail, he spearheaded, supervised, and saw to completion numerous large-scale and long-term projects relating to broad aspects of Iranian studies throughout his life.

Ehsānollāh Yārshāter was born on 3 April 1920 in Hamadan, Iran, to Hāshem Yārshāter, a merchant, and Rowhāniyeh Misāqiyeh, from a family of physicians, both of whom originated from Kashan. In the early 1930s Yarshater lost both of his parents within a year of each other and subsequently moved to Tehran and for some time lived with his maternal uncle. Upon completion of his secondary education in 1934, he received a scholarship to study at the Normal School (Dānesh-sarā-ye Moqaddamāti). A second scholarship took him to the Teachers' Training College (Dāneshsarā-ye 'Āli), where he studied Persian language and literature.

Upon his graduation in 1941, he was initially employed by the Ministry of Education as a teacher at the 'Elmieh High School and two years later he was appointed deputy director of the Normal School. At the same time, Yarshater also attended the Faculty of Law at Tehran University and received his second BA in 1944. During these years he also continued his studies in Persian literature at the University of Tehran and was awarded a doctorate in this field in 1947. His dissertation was on "Persian

Poetry in the Second Half of the 15th Century,” supervised by the noted scholar and statesman ‘Ali-Asghar Hekmat (1892-1980); a revised version was published in 1955.

At Tehran University, Yarshater studied with a number of outstanding scholars of Persian literature, such as Ebrāhīm Pur-Dāvud (1886-1968), Mohammad-Taqi Bahār (1886-1951), Ahmad Bahmanyār (1884-1955), Badi‘ al-Zamān Foruzānfar (1904-70), Sayyid Mohammad-Kāzem ‘Assār (1884-1975), and ‘Abbās Eqbāl Āshtiāni (1896-1956). In 1948, he received a scholarship from the British Council to study Old and Middle Iranian philology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London University, under the supervision of the renowned German Iranologist, Walter Bruno Henning (1908-76). This association had a long-lasting influence on his subsequent scholarly direction.

In 1953, Yarshater received an MA in Old and Middle Iranian from SOAS, and returned to Iran. In the same year in Tehran he commenced a soon-to-be highly regarded publishing foundation, Bongāh-e Tarjomeh va Nashr-e Ketāb (BTNK; Institute for the Translation and Publication of Books), which supervised the publication of a remarkable list of scholarly works, both authored and translated, in a wide variety of fields including Persian classical texts, Iranian studies, translations of world classics, and works for young readers as well as children’s books, among others. It is estimated that by the time of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, BTNK had published some 500 titles, each of which was highly praised for the choice of topic, textual quality, editorial care, and the overall elegance and production layout.

Upon his return to Iran in 1953, Yarshater was also appointed at Tehran University, first as an Assistant Professor of Persian Literature and, in the following year, of Old Iranian. In 1958, in collaboration with a number of Iranian scholars such as Iraj Afshār (1925-2011), he founded Anjoman-e Ketāb (the Book Society) and helped launch its periodical *Rāhnamā-ye Ketāb* (Book Guide), which under his guidance flourished for the next twenty years.

In 1958 Yarshater was invited by Columbia University for a two-year appointment as Visiting Associate Professor of Indo-Iranian. In 1960, he completed his doctoral dissertation for London University on “The Tati Dialect Spoken to the South of Qazvin.” His examiners were the noted scholars W.B. Henning, the French linguist Émile Benveniste (1902-76), and the Iranologist Ilya Gershevitch (1914-2001). In that year Yarshater returned to Iran and succeeded Pur-Dāvud as Professor of Ancient Iranian Culture at Tehran University. In the same year, he married Latifeh Alvieh (1926-99), whom he had met in 1956 in Tehran, who was involved in various educational and cultural activities, mostly for women. He only held his new position in Tehran for one year, before returning to New York in 1961 to fill the inaugural Chair of Iranian Studies at Columbia University, endowed by the philanthropist Armenian art collector Hagop Kevorkian (1872-1962). Yarshater retained this position for the rest of his academic career. In 1968 he founded the Center for Iranian Studies at Columbia University, turning it into a widely recognized platform for excellence in scholarship on various aspects of Iranian studies.

As attested by all biographies written about him, Yarshater did things with determination, effectiveness, and excellence. In form and in substance he believed in the

merits of institutional operation and support, either working with existing institutions or grafting his own initiatives onto a larger framework. This can be seen in almost everything that he touched, from his activities during his early career, to multiple publication and research initiatives in the 1950s in Tehran, to his lasting legacy at Columbia University. In the early 1970s, Yarshater succeeded in securing funding from the Pahlavi Foundation for what later became the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*—this support was given in 1974 and ended by the Revolution in 1979. Also in 1979 he persuaded the Iranian Plan Organization to contribute to the funding of the *Encyclopaedia* but this too was interrupted by the Revolution. Eventually, in the early 1980s, Yarshater presented the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) a funding proposal to revive the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* at Columbia University with himself as the founding editor. In 1990, he also initiated the founding of the Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation (EIF) in order to provide long-term support for the production of the *Encyclopaedia* as a unique research tool for all aspects of Iranian studies.

Over the years, Professor Yarshater created *Bibliotheca Persica* Press as a vehicle for the publication of many significant works in the field. Under its imprint several important book series appeared, beginning with the Persian Heritage Series, which effectively began in 1960 and continued throughout later decades—around thirty-three volumes were produced in this series alone to 1980. This was followed by the Persian Studies Series (begun in the late 1960s), the Modern Persian Literature Series (in the late 1970s), the Persian Art Series (also in the late 1970s), and the Persian Texts Series (in the late 1980s). Adding to these was the Columbia Lecture Series on Iranian Studies (in the late 1980s).

In 1983, Yarshater established the Persian Heritage Foundation (PHF) to support ongoing scholarly, artistic, and cultural work and fund major book awards on a wide range of areas relating to Iranian studies and Persian culture. Drawing on PHF support, Yarshater was also the General Editor of *A History of Persian Literature*—a projected twenty-volume undertaking, begun in 2009 with many volumes already in print, this series is an extensive up-to-date survey of Persian literature which includes samples of poetry and prose with translations and commentary by distinguished scholars.

Yarshater used his skills and his stature to secure necessary funding to support these initiatives, and whatever funds he raised he redirected to his many scholarly and publication plans—from supporting both young and established scholars in the field to supporting cultural programs and research projects. He was as unique in raising substantial funds as he was in his frugal personal lifestyle. He dedicated all his resources to the advancement of scholarship on Iran and the Persian heritage.

During his lifetime, Yarshater was the recipient of several prestigious awards, including the Thirteenth Giorgio Levi Della Vida Medal for Achievement in Islamic Studies from UCLA in 1991, and the Eighth Annual Bita Prize for Persian Arts from Stanford University in 2015. He was a former president (in 1997) and an elected honorary member (in 2000) of the Association for Iranian Studies (AIS) and a recipient of its Lifetime Achievement Award (in 2006). He was also an honorary member of the *Societas Europaea Iranologica*, member of the Executive Committee of *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum*, and of the Institute of Central and West Asian Studies in Pakistan.

His final years (September 2015 to September 2018) were spent in Fresno, California, among his close family, enjoying visits by friends, admirers, and former students and colleagues from near and far. Ehsan Yarshater is survived by his niece Mojdeh Yarshater and her husband Tony Jebian.

In August 2018, Columbia University received a substantial gift from the Persian Heritage Foundation and endowed the Ehsan Yarshater Center for Iranian Studies.

Professor Yarshater left behind an impressive corpus of authored and translated as well as edited works of high scholarship. For additional biographical information and a full bibliography of his publications up to 1990, see M. Boyce and G. Windfuhr, "Foreword," in D. Amin and M. Kasheff, with A. S. Shahbazi (eds.), *Iranica Varia: Papers in Honor of Professor Ehsan Yarshater*, Textes et Mémoires volume XVI, Acta Iranica 30. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990, pp. ix-xxxii; for his publications up to 2018 see: <https://cfis.columbia.edu/>

Further biographical information is also given in Ehsan Yarshater and Mandana Zandian, *Ehsan Yarshater in Conversation with Mandana Zandian* [in Persian]. Los Angeles, CA: Ketab Corp., 2016.

For some representative publications, see:

- Ehsan Yarshater, *Avicenna's Five Treatises (Panj Resāleh)*, annotated edition. Tehran: Anjoman-e Āsār-e Melli, 1953.
- Ehsan Yarshater, *Avicenna's Theorems and Remarks (al-Ishārāt wa al-Tanbihāt)*, annotated edition. Tehran: Anjoman-e Āsār-e Melli, 1953.
- Ehsan Yarshater, *Persian Poetry under Shahrokh (the Second Half of the 15th Century)*. Tehran: Tehran University Press, 1955.
- Ehsan Yarshater, *Legends of the Epic of Kings (Dāstān-hā-ye Shāhnāmeḥ)*. Tehran: Iran-American Joint Fund Publications, 1957, 1958, 1964; 2nd ed. 1974, 1982 (awarded a UNESCO prize in 1959).
- Ehsan Yarshater, *A Grammar of Southern Tati Dialects, Median Dialect Studies I*. The Hague and Paris: Mouton & Co., 1969.
- Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), *Iran Faces the Seventies*. New York: Praeger, 1971.
- Ehsan Yarshater and David Bivar (eds.), *Inscriptions of Eastern Mazandaran*, Corpus Inscriptionem Iranicarum. London: Lund and Humphries, 1978.
- Ehsan Yarshater and Richard Ettinghausen (eds.), *Highlights of Persian Art*. New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1982.
- Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 1. New York: Routledge, 1982, ongoing publication; online edition: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/>
- Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), *Cambridge History of Iran, Vol. III: Seleucid, Parthian and Sassanian Periods*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), *Persian Literature*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1988.
- Ehsan Yarshater (General ed.), *History of al-Tabari*, 40 vols. New York: State University of New York Press, 1989-2009.
- Ehsan Yarshater, "The Persian Presence in the Islamic World," in Richard Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh (eds.), *The Persian Presence in the Islamic World*, based on the 13th Giorgio Levi Della Vida Biennial Conference. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 4-125.
- Ehsan Yarshater (Founding ed.), *A History of Persian Literature*, 20 projected vols., London: I.B. Tauris, 2009 to the present.

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