

In Memoriam : Richard Nelson Frye

Professor Emeritus, Harvard University
Faculty of Arts and Sciences

March 29th, 2014

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Co-author, friend and former student



In a career that spanned over six decades at Harvard University Richard Frye took upon himself to master the various disciplines necessary for a broad view of the field, which today would ordinarily be the task of several scholars. He came aptly to be regarded among scholars as dean of the world's Iranists. His books and articles are established as references on the subject of Iranian history and culture. He came to be known among friends and colleagues as Frye. He passed away at home on Thursday March 27th, 2014. His will for years has been to be buried in Iran, as stated in his CNN interview, and in the past few weeks he further emphasized that to me.

His wish for Iran, which he related to me repeatedly during the past thirty years, was to see once again the open press, the liberal exchange of ideas, the freedom of expression in Iran leading to the emergence of a free and open society. This, he would remind us, occurred in the period from the end of WWII to 1953, when Mosaddeq was overthrown and the Shah began to rule dictatorially, not just reign. It also occurred prior to and during the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. He was sure that this state of events is going to come about again. It is in the natural course of history.

While a scholar of the history of the millennia, his own life and times constitute a history of our times. He lived through the Great Depression as a boy, served in World War II, worked through the Cold War, lived through the Korean War, the Vietnam War, revolutions in the Middle East and elsewhere, the two Gulf wars and through many other events. During his career he travelled the world over in his effort to contribute to Iranian Studies, sometimes through quite hazardous routes, and continued to do so to his 93rd year, attending a conference in Sarajevo in 2013. He met and dined with royalty and statesmen, as well as slept nearby peasants, among qanats, and was appreciative equally of both. Early in his career, the editor and compiler of the monumental, 50-volume encyclopedic Persian dictionary, Dehkhoda, gave him the honorific *Irandoost*, or Iranophile, which has adorned the doorway to his office at Harvard. The cultural *Iran* that referred to, of course, is different from the political Iran displayed on the media in the West.

One of his traits of character, whether as a person or a scholar, was to see and maintain a baseline rational view of matters. That is to say he would not be inclined to take sides, but lead where logic, reason, and analysis applied to facts would lead him. This naturally meant that the results of this process would sometimes run counter to positions of those, on either sides of an issue, who had, to various degrees, arbitrarily adopted their positions. Thus for example in the former regime of Iran, under the Shah's reign, when he felt the pre-Islamic heritage of Iran was being glorified to a degree at the expense of its post-Islamic, Richard Frye was among the first to take a stand against it. He did so in his book *The Golden Age of Persia*, published in 1975 while he was in Iran, for which he was severely criticized and threatened with expulsion from the country.

In addition to his own accomplishments, being a man of good will, Frye has over the years helped many scholars obtain positions at universities, and helped set up endowments. There exist relatively few chairs of Iranian Studies in universities around the world, and after the 1979 revolution in Iran most of what existed were transformed into Arabic studies or studies in general of the Middle East. What few programs in Iranian Studies exist now after 1979 are largely due to later endowments by successful Iranian entrepreneurs, such visionaries as Hamid Moghadam of Stanford University (joined generously by Bita Daryabari), and Fariborz Maseeh of UCI - with both of whom it is a matter of pride to be schoolmates. When several months ago a chair endowed at Princeton University by my relatives Bijan and Sharmin Mosavver-Rahmani was going to be offered to a scholar of Arabic and Greek studies, Richard Frye's friend Ehsan Yarshater, Editor-in-Chief of Encyclopaedia Iranica, who early on had replaced him in Columbia, launched a petition campaign to stop this. Frye wrote to dissuade the President of Princeton, pointing to this imbalance and how well Arabic and Greek studies are endowed at the top American universities.

Frye's work has covered the spectrum of Iranian studies and the history of Iran and related cultures across the centuries and millennia, the sources and testaments of which extant occur in multiple extinct and living languages. He needs little introduction to those familiar with the field. The sources range from Avestan and Old Persian to Pahlavi and Sogdian to present day modern Iranian languages.

Since for a culture that is several millennia old the political boundaries are of little consequence, Frye's work has taken him well beyond what is recognized in the news today as Iran proper. This has included regions possessed of Iranian culture and heritage that have become politically detached from Iran in the vicissitudes of the past few centuries, ranging from those flanking Iran and the Caspian Sea to Central Asia, including former southern Soviet republics, to which he has often referred collectively as Greater Iran, as he would say 'from China to Hungary, and from outer Mongolia to Mesopotamia'.

Frye received his PhD in history and philology from Harvard University in 1946, with his thesis on Narshakhi's *History of Bokhara*. He joined the Harvard faculty

in 1948 and when in the late 1950s the late Agha Khan, spiritual leader of the Ismaili sect of Shiism endowed the chair for Iranian Studies, he was named the first scholar to fill that chair by McGeorge Bundy, then Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, later to be advisor to JFK. Frye co-founded the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES) at Harvard University, as well as NAASR, the National Association for Armenian Studies and Research. The history and culture of Iran being intertwined with that of a number of other nations, Armenia and Iran share linguistic, cultural and ethnic bonds as the two Zoroastrian nations before their conversion, respectively, to Christianity and Islam. They retained their common agrarian traditions through the changes of religion.

From 1969 to 1975 Frye was Director of the Asia Institute in Shiraz as successor to Arthur Upham Pope, editor of the 18-volume *Survey of Persian Art*. There he lived with his family and worked at the Naranjestan (shown below), a most beautiful palace-garden in a city known for such gardens going back many centuries (cf. Arrian's description of Cyrus's mausoleum on his website). Naranjestan was part of the university at Shiraz. It is now a museum.



He has also lived, taught and conducted research and studies in Germany and other European countries, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and a number of other Middle Eastern and Central Asian states. He was fluent in Farsi, Turkish, Arabic and German, French, Russian and knows other languages to various degrees. He originally composed his *History of Ancient Iran* in German.

One of his most interesting works was a translation of a graphic account of a Middle Eastern traveller, Ibn Fadlan, of the Vikings, connecting his field of study with his remote ancestry. This book was utilized to produce the script for a movie.

Frye lectured in Persian in recent years in universities in Tehran and Isfahan, emphasizing the separation of religion and state in history and expounding the underlying basis from the foundation of the Iranian state, ca. 550 BC, to the present. The previous President of Iran in a gathering of scholars in 2010 honored him by laying at his disposal a historic mansion in Isfahan from the Safavid period (1500-1722), its inner courtyard shown below.



Photo:Hamid Reza Niko maram

One of his amusing topics, with which he had had first-hand experience, initially not so pleasant, was the art of forgery of ancient artifacts and texts in Iran ! The interest of scholars in ancient antiquities in Iran had led to the emergence of an underground industry, which over time had become quite refined in its products, and as he would point out, an art form itself !

As an anecdote, in the 1980s when he gave me use of his large library of many thousand books and more articles, in going through them I came upon a note dated 1948 inserted in one book, written to the principal of the school he was teaching at in Afghanistan, saying how he had fallen sick and could not attend to duties for the day.

In December 2013 Frye suffered a fall at home in Cambridge, which caused bone fractures, and told me "I had a stroke". Since he had had a stroke about ten years ago, I sensed he knew the symptoms and had experienced the same. However, the hospital's classification later was not that of a stroke, but hematoma. He was in the ICU for a few days, and a couple of weeks in the regular ward at Mt Auburn Hospital, his family and I visiting him daily. Then he spent a few weeks in two rehabilitation centers, first in Boston then in Cambridge, before being released to home. His wife Eden arranged for physiotherapy and daily nurse visits at home, but the consequential effect of the bone fractures was that he had become bed-ridden and unable to walk, over the last three months, resulting in turn a gradual worsening of his health and degradation of the strong constitution we had seen enable him to come through on prior occasions, such as the fall he had suffered over ice several years ago and prior major illnesses, including prostate cancer, and withstand the rigors of travel to remote places during his earlier years.

Over the past few weeks, seeing the point of departure from this world coming, he and his wife called and asked me to arrange for burial in Iran. I met and consulted with poli sci and contemporary history scholars and friends Abbas Milani of Stanford and Houshang Chehabi of BU, then visiting Stanford, who are on top of the current politics, and they were forthcoming with help and advice to determine appropriate sites. Other friends here and in Iran arranged for specifics and logistics. Fariborz Maseeh, a schoolmate and founder of the center for

Persian Studies at the University of California at Irvine, whom Dick and I saw on his many trips to California, has offered to pay the costs associated.

Richard Nelson Frye was born in 1920 in Alabama, and in a few years his family moved to Illinois. His parents had emigrated from Sweden. They had three sons, one of whom passed about twelve years ago. Having widely travelled throughout his life and lived and worked for years at a time outside the US, his children were exposed to many cultures, attended international schools such as those in Iran, and came to acquire an international outlook as well as inherit a tradition of teaching or study of history. Over the years his children have built bridges from the US to other cultures. He leaves behind his wife Eden Naby, in Brimfield, his son Nels, a graduate of history, residing in China with his wife and working editor of *Stylites Magazine*, his son Robert, a high school teacher, in nearby West Springfield with his wife and three children, his daughter Gurprasad (Rebecca), an elementary school teacher in Los Angeles with her husband and son, six grandchildren and one on the way, and a recent arriver, a great grandchild, his older brother William residing in Palo Alto whom he visited two or three times a year, and who has two children, five grandchildren and one great grandchild. Bill had been a marine engineer, and has taught courses in mechanical engineering at Stanford. When I saw Bill on Wed. the 26th and let him know Dick might pass away, we did not expect it would happen the next day. A few years ago Frye's elder son Sat Purkha (Jeffrey) passed away peacefully in sleep in Los Angeles at his sister's home, believed to be due to a stroke or heart attack. He had studied archeology at Harvard and in later years had come to work in the field of health and nutrition.

A full bibliography of Richard Frye would entail a long article in itself, but notable among his more readily accessible works are the books *Iran* (1953), *Persia* (British version of the latter, 1968, both being short readable introductions), *The Heritage of Persia* (1963) focusing on the essential impact and legacy of ancient, pre-Islamic Iran, *The Golden Age of Persia* (1975), showing how the Persians turned Islam from the ethnic faith of Arabia into an international religion, and the continuity of Persian culture through Islam, *History of Ancient Iran* (1984), dealing in greater depth with topics addressed in *The Heritage of Persia* and in his papers, *The Heritage of Central Asia* (1996), *Greater Iran* (memoirs, 2005), and *History of Bukhara* (2007). For further information the reader may refer to

his website, which includes an excellent biography to 1990 (its few errors being minor and inconsequential) by a former student, the late professor Shapur Shahbazi of Oregon State University:

<http://www.richardfrye.org/biographies.html> .

For his latest work the reader may refer to the summary of our upcoming book on his website, documenting how the Founding Fathers of the United States drew inspiration from the founder of the Iranian state, Cyrus the Great, and indicating Iran's contribution as integral with that of Europe in the founding of America : <http://www.richardfrye.org/JeffersonandCyrus.html> .