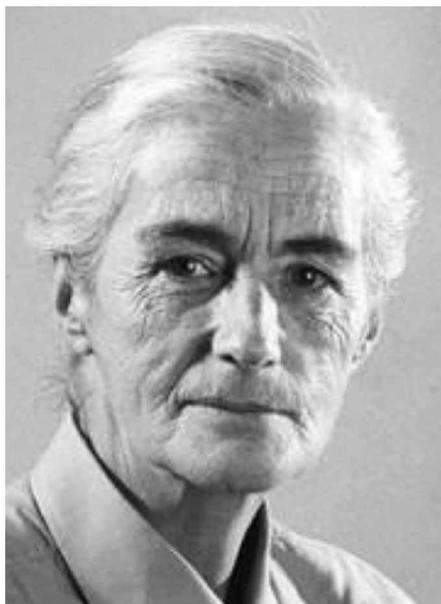


Peter Chelkowski

In Memoriam
Professor Ann K. S. Lambton
(8 February 1912–19 July 2008)



Professor Ann Lambton, a famous Iranologist (or Persianist as she is called in England), of international renown, died on 19 July 2008, at the age of 96 at her home in Northumberland. Four days later, on 23 July 2008, a full page obituary devoted to Lambton appeared in the *Times* of London. A full page obituary in the *Times* is usually reserved for famous politicians or people in the fields of the arts, music, letters and entertainment, not for academicians. But many believe that Lambton through her extramural activities was a politician who used her knowledge of Iran to shape and aid in the implementation of British foreign policy there. Be that as it may, Lambton was different. She was an original. And a women; something rare in the British academic establishment of her

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time. She was one of the “Last of the Mohicans” of the now-dying breed of great Orientalists.

Perhaps one of the most amazing aspects of Lambton’s life is the fact that if it wasn’t for an unexpected growth spurt in her teens, this brilliant academic career may not have taken place. Lambton was born on 8 February 1912. Her father was the Hon. George Lambton, fifth son of the second Earl of Durham. Her mother, Cicely, was the elder daughter of Sir John Horner of Mells Park, Somerset.

Ann was groomed to become a jockey. The authors of the preface to the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, XLIX (1986): 1 (which was published as a Festschrift honoring Professor Lambton), reflect on this. She was destined to become an outstanding jockey since she was prepared by one of the foremost horse trainers of the time: her father. At the age of 14, her riding prowess was admired by no less than a journalist for *The Sporting Chronicle*. However, jockeys must be short and light, and Lambton grew to be almost six feet tall—an imposing figure of patrician bearing.

As her physiognomy prevented Lambton from devoting her life to horse-racing, she left the stables of Newmarket and moved to London, where in 1930, she enrolled as a non-degree student at the University of London’s School of Oriental Studies (SOAS). Reading T. E. Lawrence’s *The Revolt in the Desert* may have inspired her to pursue this course of studies. Her mentor, Professor Denison Ross, director of the School, counseled her to concentrate on Persian as a major, and Arabic as a minor, and she matriculated to read for this degree, which she received in 1935. The turning point of her study of Persian came after her first visit to Iran in the summer of 1934. She fell in love with the country and its people. This was followed by a year-long stay in Iran in 1936–37 on the Ouseley Memorial Scholarship and Aga Khan Traveling Grant. In Iran, she became acquainted with many Iranians and made many friends from all walks of life. She also became accustomed to Persian culture. In 1939, she defended her doctoral thesis, *On the Seljuq Institutions*, and was awarded a PhD. Among her teachers were Minorsky, Gibb, Taqizadeh, and Ross.

Lambton was doing research in Iran when the Second World War broke out. Immediately, she put her knowledge of Iran at the service of the war effort. She joined the British legation as Press Attaché. She was very skillful and instrumental in channeling information about Britain to the Iranian press, as well as supplying the Persian language service of the BBC with information about Iran. These activities were of great importance in a country which had a strong pro-German sentiment. The Iranians saw Germany as a non-colonial power with good engineers who in Iran had helped to build excellent railways, roads, and public infrastructure. The adjective “almani” in Persian, meaning “German,” even today denotes goods of superior quality. At the beginning of the war, German propaganda was very active in Iran. It was Ann Lambton who successfully battled German influences there. For the extraordinary execution of her duties as Press Attaché, she was awarded the OBE (Officer of the Order of the British Empire).

Upon her return to Britain after the war in 1945, Lambton was appointed as senior lecturer in Persian at the SOAS. In 1948, she was promoted to Reader, and in 1953, Chair of Persian. In 1979, she retired and was named Professor Emeritus and Honorary Fellow of SOAS. Her reputation in academia, however, was really established by the depth and breadth of her remarkable research and publications. The flagships of her very long list of published work are: *Landlord and Peasant in Persia: A Study of Land Tenure and Land Revenue Administration* (London, 1953); and *The Persian Land Reform, 1962–1966* (Oxford, 1969). Her interest in rural environments could probably be traced back to her mother's ancestors who were primarily interested in rural pursuits. In her fieldwork for *Landlord and Peasant* she visited even the most remote areas of Iran, traveling often by horse or camel, on foot, and by bicycle.

Lambton used a bicycle as her main form of transportation in London. Seeing her arriving every morning at SOAS on a bike, sometimes in rough inclement London weather, I often thought of that Herodotus line describing the Persian postal system: "Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night, will stay these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds." She was tough, physically and mentally, and expected the same attitudes (in some moderation) from her students and associates. At SOAS, she played squash, often beating her younger opponents. In the countryside, she loved to walk and hike. In the summer of 1969, I was doing research in Istanbul. Professor Lambton stopped by on her way to a conference in Cyprus and visited me for a week or so. One day, I took her to Polonezkoy, a Polish village located on the Asiatic shore of the Bosphorus. This settlement was established by Prince Adam Czartoryski in 1842, as a refuge for Polish freedom fighters who had participated in the unsuccessful uprising against the Russian occupiers in 1830–31. It was a pleasure to watch Lambton in her element in this village environment. There was no end to the questions and comments which she posed to the simple farmers regarding agriculture, machinery, and daily life. Polonezkoy is not far from the shore of the Black Sea. After visiting with the villagers, we drove to the shore and started walking towards the east. After two hours of brisk walking (or maybe more like marching), I was exhausted. I turned to the Professor and said, "If we continue walking at this pace, soon we will hit the Soviet border, and the Russians are going to arrest me." She looked at my face covered with sweat and taking pity on me, said, "It is a good reason to turn around and head for home."

In the fall of 1968, Lambton attended a conference on Iran at Columbia University in New York City. After three days, she was tired of the concrete jungle that is Manhattan. She asked me to take her out of the city. We drove across the George Washington Bridge onto the Palisades Parkway going north towards Bear Mountain. The autumnal colors of the leaves were at their peak. Lambton was thrilled, and gushed in appreciation, "Even in England, we do not have such beautiful colors." Bear Mountain, less than 50 miles north of New York City, is the site of many battles fought between the Americans and

the British in the War of Independence and there are quite a number of monuments commemorating American victories. Near the US Military Academy at Westpoint, we stopped the car and started walking through the woods. After half an hour or so of Lambton's usual brisk trotting, we suddenly realized that bullets were whizzing by our heads. I saw a uniformed soldier in the distance and ran to him with my map, asking him where we were and what was going on. He replied, "I can tell you where you shouldn't be. This is the Westpoint firing range. Get lost in that direction," and he pointed the way to safety. When we reached the indicated area, Lambton said, "It took you only a few months to become an American patriot [I had been appointed to a position at New York University earlier that year], and now you want to have another Brit killed and another monument erected!"

I met Ann Lambton for the first time at SOAS in 1959. She was a little puzzled to meet a young Pole who had managed to come out from behind the Iron Curtain to study with her. Her lectures were very informative and interesting, but very formal and read from her prepared text. Her Persian language classes, on the other hand, were lively, animated, and sometimes even funny, providing that the students knew the grammar and were prepared. Of course we used the grammar book she had written, *Persian Grammar* (Cambridge, 1953—numerous reprints). Her *Grammar* could be considered as two books in one, since in studying Persian grammar one had to study English grammar as well. A companion to this book is *Persian Vocabulary* (Cambridge, 1954—many reprints followed). It is a very thoughtful and useful selection of Persian vocabulary intended mainly for students of contemporary Persian. In her Persian classes, there were often British government employees from various ministries studying the language before being posted to Iran or Afghanistan. Most of them were intimidated by the austere towering figure instructing them. Lambton's typical British gentry wardrobe of tweed suits and sturdy brogues contributed to her imposing aspect. She was a very demanding teacher who accepted no excuses from her students. One day in Persian language class, I saw tears in eyes of a major in the British infantry. The *khanom*, as we used to call her, made that day miserable for the military man. But beneath her formidable façade was a very kind person, genuinely interested in the welfare of her students.

After Lambton retired in 1979, she settled in a little house called *Gregory* in Kirk Newton, near her family's estate in Northumberland. The first ten years of her retirement was devoted to the study of the government of Iran and Islam. She published seminal works during this time: *Theory and Practice in Medieval Persian Government* (1980); *State and Government in Medieval Islam* (1981); *Qajar Persia* (1987); and *Continuity and Change in Medieval Persia* (1988). She was also the co-editor with P. M. Holt and Bernard Lewis of *The Cambridge History of Islam* (2 vols., 1970).

The remaining years of Lambton's life were devoted to Christian thought and the doctors of the faith. She was Professor Emeritus of the diocese of Newcastle and chairperson of the Iran Diocese Association. She served on the Middle East

committee advising archbishops on interfaith matters. For many years, she delivered biannual Lent lectures to clergy and laity. In 2004, the Archbishop of Canterbury, in acknowledgement of her work and commitment to Christianity and the Church of England, bestowed on her the Cross of St. Augustine. In addition to being a Fellow of SOAS, she was a Fellow of the British Academy and an Honorary Fellow of New Hall, Cambridge. In addition, she was an Honorary Doctor of the University of Cambridge and an Honorary Doctor of the University of Durham, where in 2001 an annual “Professor A. K. S. Lambton Honorary Lectureship” was established and inaugurated by Lambton herself.

Ann Lambton was a monumental figure in the field of Persian Studies and a formidable scholar who shaped generations of students through her passion for teaching and her unswerving commitment to excellence. Equally, she made a lasting contribution to British foreign policy. The strength of her character and the force of her intellect were simply remarkable and touched all those who were fortunate enough to know her. A bibliography of Ann Lambton’s books and articles covering the years 1938–86 may be found in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, XLIX (1986): 5–7.