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THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF IRAN
IN SEVEN VOLUMES

Volume 7

CAMBRIDGE

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THE CAMBRIDGE
HISTORY OF
IRAN

Volume 7

FROM NADIR SHAH TO THE
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

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PREFACE

This volume treats aspects of Iran's history in the period between 1722 and 1979, which began with the collapse of the Safavid dominion after two centuries, and ended in the overthrow of Pahlavī rule after fifty-three years. Iran's vulnerable geo-political situation was signalled by the events that followed, once invasion from what is now Afghanistan had engulfed the Safavid capital, Isfahan, in 1722. Further invasions came from the Ottoman Empire in the west and from Russia in the north. To some it seemed inevitable that the revolution in 1979 would similarly invite invasion, and in 1981 it did, from Iraq. The 18th- and 20th-century episodes with which this volume opens and ends typify the repeated catastrophes characteristic of Iranian history, paramount and relatively stable governments alternating with periods of, in the past, regional autonomies and, as today, factionalism representative of divided authority and productive of great uncertainty.

Periods of regional autonomies have often been those of distinguished literary and artistic activity. Poets and annalists strove to keep alive cultural traditions salvaged from empires unfavourable to artistic freedom. That this should be so is less a paradox than it might seem. Stable government, over regions each with their own cultural traditions, meant repression to promote uniformity. When paramount government from a single centre was replaced by competing regional rulers from several, as this generally followed disasters across the whole land, it was in the regions, once some measure of peace was re-established, that traditional arts and crafts could be revived. Patronage of artists became a feature of competitive courts. At the same time, the sufferings of a nation never unaware of an overall cultural identity, especially in so far as this was enshrined in a shared and prized language capable of remarkable beauty of expression, occasioned literary artists' laments during interregna distracted by internecine warfare and the threat of foreign invasion. Extremely adverse material conditions encouraged a poetry which offered spiritual counsel combined with comprehension of the human predicament. A spiritual humanism, born of terrible experiences, served to remind people of the spirit within them and of their essential dignity, whatever indignities and cruelties they underwent.

The shock of disintegration on the fall of the Safavids was followed by Nādir Shāh's extravagant wars, when campaigns abroad were partly prompted by impoverishment at home. That Nādir Shāh failed lastingly to re-unite Iran, and

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left it scarcely better than he had found it, augmented despair. How forlorn hopes had become may be gauged by the way in which Karīm Khān Zand's rule, over little more than a quarter of the country, has been seen as an interlude of unusual benignity. The subsequent Qājār conquest of the whole was, in comparison with what had preceded it, a not unwelcome settlement, in spite of the cruelties which accompanied its achievement.

This settlement, however, also produced despondency. Under the second Qājār ruler, territory which the Safavids had counted as theirs was seized by the Russians. Under the third and fourth, claims to Herat were unsuccessfully pursued and finally relinquished. Administrative arbitrariness and corruption continued prevalent: the hardships of the people were not greatly ameliorated. British and Russian intervention steadily increased. While both powers insisted that they sought to preserve it, on their own terms, the integrity of Iran was imperilled. Only a change of government in Russia, Iran's rejection of Lord Curzon's plans for what would, in effect, have made Iran a British protectorate, and the rise of a strong leader in Rizā Shāh gave Iran more tangible evidence of its independent identity than retention of its own language and distinctive Lion and Sun emblem.

The Qājārs, nevertheless, allowed Iranian traditions, good as well as bad, to continue. They did not make the error of the last Pahlavī ruler and permit tradition to be so jeopardised by alien influences that in the end the people rose to defend it. By 1979, the people wanted to return to norms and values which they understood, when those imported seemed not to profit but only to confuse them. Under the Qājārs, western dominance, while it furnished Iran with fair and, in the eyes of some, less than fair frontiers, had compelled Iranians to seek mastery of western ways the better to resist them. Yet from the Qājār period sufficient of the old culture survived for western novelties to be contained and to be a catalyst in an intellectual and literary revival, manifested in the Constitutional Movement of this century's first decade. Rizā Shāh's reign showed that even renewal of autocracy could be palliated by scholars and writers who, employing western techniques to good purpose, focussed attention on their country's rich artistic heritage. After 1941, the freedom which followed Rizā Shāh's departure, although darkened by foreign occupation until 1946, was conspicuous for works of literature and scholarly research. The resilience of Iran's creative and intellectual strength was again demonstrated.

This culturally promising interlude ended in 1953. Despondency and a failure of confidence among thinking men reappeared, in spite of developments which superficially and by western standards might have augured Iran's progress as an

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increasingly affluent modern nation state. These developments were fatally marred. Expectations were aroused which could not be fulfilled. More dangerous was the risk that cherished traditions would be overwhelmed by what was considered progress, but conceived according to neither fully understood nor applicable foreign criteria, by the weight of repression and by the ubiquity of western agencies. Thus the turmoil in which the period treated in this volume ended is explicable in more than purely political and economic terms.

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