

## NEW LIGHTS ON THE TRANSLATION OF HAJJI BABA ISFAHANI

The picturesque and picaresque novel, *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan*, by James Justinian Morier, has been a source of misapprehension and some speculation ever since it first appeared in England in 1824. This is mainly due to the dual character of the book. On one hand the picture drawn by Morier is, in certain aspects, preposterously exaggerated and overwrought and therefore to regard Ḥājji Bābā as a typical Persian is wrong and misleading. On the other hand the author displays such amazing knowledge and understanding of the private lives, customs and practices of some sectors of Persian society that it is difficult to credit a foreigner with such meticulous observations. Hence the controversy about the book. Was Ḥājji Bābā — despite the denial of the author in his introduction to *Hajji Baba in England*: „Here I beg to disclaim personality of any kind...” — a real person, namely the historical Mīrzā Abu'l Ḥasan, the Persian Envoy Extraordinary to Great Britain, who accompanied Morier on his journey to England and back to Persia, or was he an imaginary hero (rascal seems to be a more appropriate term) created by the writer? Did James Morier write the book himself, or did some Persian friends help him? And so on. But such conjectures need not be pursued here since our main concern is with the Persian translation of the book.

Yet even when we address ourselves to the Persian text of *Hajji Baba*, we find that the realms of speculation and doubt are entered anew. Until recently it has generally been assumed that the translator was Ḥājji Shaykh Aḥmad „Rūḥī” of Kerman, the staunch liberal opponent of Nāsiru'd-Dīn Shah and all that constituted the political and spiritual establishment in Iran in his day. This Shaykh Aḥmad's life is briefly outlined in the Introduction to the first edition of the Persian translation, published in Calcutta in 1905, by Col. D. C. Phillott, who entertained no doubts that Shaykh Aḥmad was the translator. However, such a claim, advanced on his behalf posthumously by his British editor, must now be disclaimed on the evidence Shaykh Aḥmad himself affords.

For in a letter to the late Professor E. G. Browne in 1892<sup>1</sup> Shaykh Aḥmad unequivocally states that Mīrzā Ḥabīb-i Iṣfahānī has translated Morier's *Hajji Baba* „from the French” into Persian.

Whether the reference to French is a slip of the pen or not is not clear. What is clear is, as the translation of the relevant portion of Shaykh Aḥmad's letter

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<sup>1</sup> Browne MS. F 53<sup>2</sup>, University Library, Cambridge.