

Jane Austen and the Taliban

The Love of Strangers: What Six Muslim Students Learned in Jane Austen's London

By Nile Green.

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34 B/W illustrations. Hardcover. \$35.00.

Review by Susan Allen Ford.

I took the bait.

Nile Green has written a fascinating account of the time (September 1815–July 1819) which six Persian students spent in England. These Iranian *taliban*, or “seekers of knowledge,” were sent by the Iranian Crown Prince, Abbas Mirza, under the charge of Captain Joseph D’Arcy of the Royal Artillery, a relatively low-level official, without adequate funds or necessary contacts for the task. The students’ goal was to learn the “new sciences”—medicine, chemistry, engineering, artillery, lock-smithing—and languages. After more than a year of delay, during which they began to acquire English, grammar, history, and Latin, and to adapt to English life, they were finally settled in pursuit of their education (though financial support was a recurrent concern). Green’s primary source is the diary of one of those students, Mirza Salih, but the narrative also incorporates histories, biographies, newspapers, and archival materials.

This is a fascinating book. It positions Britain in the context of its relationship with Iran (for both nations a protective bond against Russia); it examines British educational institutions, the evangelical movement, and changes brought by the Industrial Revolution; and it serves as a meditative palimpsest, celebrating relationships founded on xenophilia in contrast to our own increasingly xenophobic rhetoric. But it is not a book that teaches us about Jane Austen.

The name of the students’ initial chaperon and today’s Jane Austen vogue constitute the slenderest of threads on which to hang a subtitle. In this book, the name “Jane Austen” should always be set in

quotation marks. As an opening gambit, Green fixes on the novel published three months after the students’ arrival: “To this day, *Emma* defines our image of the time, an age of elegant ballrooms, exquisite manners, and crimson-jacketed captains.” Perhaps it’s churlish to point out that *Emma* is noteworthy for its absence of these things—unless we credit Miss Bates’s admiration of the dingy rooms of the Crown Inn. Many of Green’s references merely invoke Austen’s England, or world, or era, her gentlemen or ladies, her “best-selling novels.”

More substantive references can be simplistic or uninformed. Green speaks confidently of Austen’s distaste for evangelicals, although Jocelyn Harris, Robert Clark, and Laura Mooneyham White have certainly complicated that picture. Some gratuitous references verge on the irresponsible: for example, “Miss Austen herself came close to marrying a Cambridge reverend called Samuel Blackall, whose Emmanuel College was little more than five minutes walk from Samuel Lee’s Queens’ College, where Mirza Salih stayed.” As evidence for this casual claim of almost-marriage, Green cites Andrew Norman’s *Jane Austen: An Unrequited Love*, a book whose claims Deirdre Le Faye demolished here (Winter 2009).

But despite the glibness of the “Jane Austen” references, some repetition as well as the overuse of “varsity” for “university,” and the unaccountable presence of Queen Victoria on the dust jacket, Green’s book presents a valuable picture of England from an unexpected, intriguing angle. Perhaps most interesting is the centrality of the evangelical movement to Salih’s story. The early connections the students formed—at Oxford, Cambridge, and the Royal Military Academy but chiefly at the East India College, Addiscombe—often involved evangelicals. Green points out the significance of the missionary impulse to the imperial project. And when Mirza Salih and Mirza Ja far tour the watering places

and industrial centers of the west of England, they find themselves visiting Hannah More, who gave Mirza Salih a copy of *Practical Piety*, with the under-

standing, at least according to More’s diary, that it should be the first work they translated into Persian and printed in Iran. (It was not.) Green deduces that Mirza Salih was involved in the translation of the Old Testament into Persian, becoming part of the evangelical enterprise.

One result of Salih’s education and contacts, Green argues, was that he came to recognize the “interdependence of knowledge and technology,” determining to master the art of printing, a technology that had not yet arrived in Iran. Salih also decided to prepare himself for diplomacy, which Green defines as “a form of politics built on affection.” He kept careful records of English manners and social rituals, participated in London society, and joined the Freemasons. Salih and Mirza Ja far were invited to attend Queen Charlotte’s funeral. When the students finally left England, they carried with them books, scientific instruments (including a telescope supplied by John Herschel), machines (including a printing press), and Mary Dudley, the English wife of artisan Muhammad Ali.

Green’s goal is to present “an alternative history of England” while documenting “a journey through knowledge and faith unto friendship.” It is, as he hopes, “an amicable tale,” of connections across cultures through mutual education.

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