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Appendix to Newsletter number 41, December 2023

Please see below for the full text of the article by Antony Wyn, mentioned in the December 2023 newsletter. Antony is the grandson of the last Lord Middleton to own Applecross Estate.

The story starts when I was about seven, when we were staying with my Grandfather Middleton for Christmas. A parcel covered in exotic looking Persian stamps came in the post, sent by the Tehran office of the Yorkshire Insurance Company, of which Grandfather was chairman at the time. Inside was a tin of pistachio nuts, with a card written in florid Persian writing. Grandfather read it out to us and translated it. Along with a number of Indian languages, he had learned Persian while serving with Hodson's Horse in northern India before WWI. He used some of them, as well some Gaelic that he had picked up here, to address his misbehaving gundogs. His war service had taken him to Mesopotamia (now Iraq), where he avoided making himself a target for Turkish snipers by removing his officer's badges. The way he told his stories made his life seem normal to this seven year old.

In search of similar adventures, I decided to read Persian and Turkish at Oxford. As soon as I had finished school I headed for Erzurum, not far from Mount Ararat, and far from any English speakers, to get a head start with Turkish by sharing a mud brick and stone house with two agricultural students for a few weeks. Then followed a spell of teaching at a church school on the edge of the North Queensland outback. There was no other school for the boys to play games with, but they were hot competitors in the local rodeos on the school horses. One of the aboriginal boys was a champion bull rider and was invited to Texas to compete.

A sponsored tour of Uruguay, Argentina and Chile to lecture on the subject of British youth, purportedly to persuade people that the Beatles and hippies were totally untypical of the 1960s, was spectacularly unsuccessful until, pursued by angry telegrams from the London sponsors, I changed to explaining what the hippies were all about, which made the student audiences much friendlier.

The studied calm of Oxford was a contrast to all this, too much so. Persian grammar and medieval philosophy pained the soul. A long unspent bequest by a benefactor to the college for the benefit of Balliol students of Persian or Arabic was enough to fund a stay in Iran for a year. My tutor simply said, "Go away, learn something, then come back." I sat at the back of poetry classes at Shiraz university in the mornings and spent the afternoons in tea houses

listening to recitations of the great epics, or sitting in a carpet shop drinking tea with the owner as he took me through the weavings of the different tribes. At the end of my stay a tribal friend invited me up to their nomad camp high up in the summer pastures. This was learning of a different order. On my return I sailed through the degree, with absolutely no idea as to what might come next.

What came next was an advertisement in The Times looking for “two energetic young Englishmen who speak Persian, have lived in Iran or Afghanistan and have enjoyed it enough to wish to return to take over from two of our retiring directors. Reply to Box No...”. There was no indication of what the job was or who they were but, out of curiosity and with no expectation of an offer, I applied. It turned out to be the Oriental Carpet Manufacturing Company, based opposite St Paul’s Cathedral. Established in 1907 in Smyrna (now Izmir) in Ottoman Turkey by a consortium of English, French and Italian merchants, it was a huge organisation, with four floors stacked high with rugs from Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, India, China and Nepal.

The interview was brief. The other successful candidate was destined for Kabul. I was to be stationed as the company buyer in Hamadan, a town in the west of Iran 6000ft up, with the mountains going up to 10,500ft right behind the house. But first I had to learn the business.

The porters in the London emporium took charge of us, teaching us how to identify and judge the carpets for quality and price. At the end of each week they put out a pile of about twenty rugs for us to identify and appraise in front of the directors. My last test was a pile of fifty rugs from different villages round Hamadan, which I had to identify blindfold, by feel alone, since each village knotted its rugs in a slightly different way. Designs could vary, but the knotting could not lie.

Once in Iran, the company’s buyer for Isfahan took me in hand. We spent a month together while he taught me bazaar manners and how to keep a poker face when negotiating. Once I had passed muster he handed me over to Hamadan, to the charge of Ali Messchi, whose family had been brokers for the firm since 1911. There was a wind-up telephone in the office in the bazaar, but none in the house. Communication with head office was by three or four cables a month, with the month’s order and a draft to the local bank to go out and buy.

We toured the local market towns to fill the orders. Life was not strenuous; if the orders were filled before the end of the month I could take off in the Land Rover in pursuit of sandgrouse, duck, or fish or occasionally go stalking mouflon up in the hills. On autumn mornings I could walk up the mountain behind the house with two or three local friends after chukar partridge and come back in time for breakfast. In the winter, when the blue hares came down from the mountain to strip the bark off the fruit trees in the foothills, the orchard owners would ask me to take my pair of hunting salukis to thin them out. They kept us fed until the spring. This was heaven for a young man of independent nature, if not of independent means.

The oil crisis of 1973 and the inflation that followed it ruined the carpet business. Life was looking bleak until an Australian horse vet came to Hamadan to see to horses belonging to the royal stud that summered in a nearby mountain village with a friend, who asked me to

put up the Australian in town as her village house might be too primitive for him. Our conversations led to an invitation to join the Tehran Racing Company, a joint venture between an Australian horse breeder and a Hong Kong casino owner, to start Hong Kong style racing in Tehran. They planned to build a new racecourse on the edge of Tehran, flying in Australian thoroughbreds, jockeys and trainers, plus a Tote betting system. The Shah had agreed to this, on condition that they also arrange separate races for local horses.

Local races were held in the Turkoman country, on the border with what is now Turkmenistan, but in a very rough and ready style that the Australians could not cope with. Not one of them was prepared to go and live out on the edge of the steppe to introduce the tribes to Jockey Club rules. Would I be interested?

The two rules we started with were, One: the first horse past the post, irrespective of who it belonged to, was the winner and Two: no substance other than a normal nutrient should be fed to a horse. The problem with the second rule was that opium was an essential part of the diet of a Turkoman horse in training and we had no means of testing for it. Until we got a laboratory we got round the rule on the obvious technicality. The first rule was going to be harder to enforce.

The Turkoman of that region were divided into four clans. If a judge decided his own clan's horse to be the winner, the other three clans would lynch him. If he judged another clan's horse to have won, his own clan would have him. After days of discussion, we agreed to have four elders on the stand, one from each tribe, the older and blinder the better. I would see the horses off at the start, follow them in a jeep and hope to reach the finish before they did, to pass judgement. I would stroll across the track and ask the judges if they agreed with my suggestion as to the winning order. They always did. Sometimes I was wrong with close finishes, but it avoided bloodshed, as they could blame the foreigner, who was clearly neutral, even if patently blind.

In the autumn of 1978 came the beginning of the Iranian revolution, which started with left wing demonstrations but was swiftly taken over by the ayatollahs. It was time to leave Iran, but what to do next? The English Jockey Club had sent over a retired steward to keep an eye on the running of the new Tehran racecourse. His wife was the sister of the late Edmund Vestey of the international meat empire (and owner of an estate by Lochinver). Seeing that trouble was brewing, she asked me if I might be interested in joining the firm, as they needed someone for their Middle East markets. This was no time for hesitation.

Two years of doing every job on the floor of their meat works in England, Australia and New Zealand had to be endured before I was allowed near a desk. Spells at a desk were but brief intervals between trips to Egypt, Iraq and the Persian Gulf selling shiploads of New Zealand lamb and Australian and Brazilian beef to Arab governments. In the mid-late 1990s, as China opened up to foreign business, I made long trips round the interior, buying frozen vegetables and game meat for the German market. The culmination of my Vestey days was three long trips to Mongolia to work with their post-Soviet government on planning new meat works for them. I persuaded the Vesteyes that they should sponsor the big Naadam race, with 600 horses racing over twenty miles, with a prize trophy of a silver stirrup cup in the shape of a

horse's head. The winner presented me with one of his horses, which he kept but ran under my name. This all came to an end when the banks decided to call in some badly judged loans taken out by the Vestey's, who had no choice but to sell most of the business and send home most of their employees. However, Lady Luck intervened once more.

A big Iranian industrialist, who had also been chairman of the British Bank of the Middle East and had had to leave the country at the time of the revolution, had decided that after the death of Khomeini he could safely return to revive what remained of his businesses, most of which had been confiscated. He was in London looking for someone to run a London office for him. A mutual friend introduced us and, within a fortnight of redundancy, a new job had appeared out of nowhere.

Western oil companies had just started exploration in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. They had been getting supplies in at great expense from Aberdeen or Dubai until they realised that bottled water, eggs, carrots, hammers, nails and portacabins would be much cheaper in Iran, but they did not know who to approach. Word went round and stopped with me. Several happy years followed, with trips out to the Caspian oilfields and to Iran, until US sanctions against Iran stopped the trade. The sanctions benefited nobody: the oil companies had to go back to importing kit from Aberdeen and my Iranian partners, who had nothing to do with the Islamic regime, lost all the business we had built up together.

Home life now beckoned. I took up writing books and articles about the Middle East and guiding occasional small groups of friends on trips to Iran, Georgia and Jordan. My greatest pleasure now, as it was my grandfather's in his day, is returning to Applecross.

And it all started with a Christmas box of pistachio nuts.

Antony Wynn