A STRANGER’S LOVE FOR IRELAND

Indo-Irish Xenophilia in
The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan (1810, 1814)

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In bravery and determination, hospitality, and prodigality, freedom of speech and open-heartedness, [the Irish] surpass the English and Scotch, but are deficient in prudence and sound judgment: they are nevertheless witty, and quick of comprehension. Thus my landlady and her children soon comprehended my broken English; and what I could not explain by language, they understood by signs: nay, before I had been a fortnight in their house, they could even understand my disfigured translations of Persian poetry.

— Abu Taleb Khan

By the turn of the nineteenth century, westward-bound Asian travelers made up a small yet significant counterflow to the British and European officials, soldiers,
Orientalists, diplomats, scientists, traders, and missionaries traveling eastward. Thousands of Asian immigrants from different social classes interacted with British residents who were sometimes hostile, sometimes friendly, but always curious about these alien sojourners. Because most were poor and illiterate, few of them wrote about their experiences; as for those who did, their accounts are mostly lost. There are only six known accounts of travels from India to Britain written before 1800: those of Joseph Emin, Mirza I’tesamuddin, Munshi Isma’il, Mir Muhammad Husain ibn Abdul Azim Isfahani, Dean Mahomet, and Mirza Abu Taleb ibn Muhammed Isfahani (1752–1805), the Muslim Indo-Iranian scholar, poet, and Lucknow nobleman who is the subject of this essay. In 1803, he wrote a travelogue in Persian of his visit to Ireland, England, and the European continent in the wake of the French Revolution. The Masir-i Talibi was translated into English by an Irish scholar working for the British East India Company (EIC), Charles Stewart, who published The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan in two editions (1810, 1814). In the epigraph to my essay, Abu Taleb records his love for the Irish and theirs for him. His Irish landlady and her children immediately understand him through gestures and “broken English,” as if they speak the same dialect. His “disfigured translations of Persian poetry” enact a transcultural fantasy of Indo-Irish linguistic kinship, set against the backdrop of England’s imperial dominance. Anglo-Islamic xenophilia has been the subject of fascinating work in recent years, but the case of Indo-Irish xenophilia that I examine here is of special relevance to the theme on which the first installment


6. His Essays about the Conditions of the Land of Europe and India (1776) has not been translated into English, but see Fisher, “From India to England and Back: Early Indian Travel Narratives for Indian Readers,” Huntington Library Quarterly 70, no. 1 (2007): 133–72, 165–66.

I argue that, while Abu Taleb’s affection for the Irish was genuine, it was largely motivated by his strong, but mostly unspoken, reservations about the English, his imperial patrons. His xenophilia, in other words, was not a disinterested love.

Ireland had been subjected to English colonization since the sixteenth century and was legally joined to Great Britain under the 1800 Act of Union, temporarily forestalling another Irish armed revolt like the one that had occurred in 1798. Yet Ireland was a subimperial center for recruiting military and administrative personnel, providing significant manpower, capital, and intellectual support for British empire building in South Asia since the 1750s, while most of the Irish population suffered from—as Abu Taleb noted—economic depression under the same restricted trade policies, agricultural reforms, and intrusive tax laws implemented in British India. As Christopher Bayly writes, “India and Ireland can both be seen as old agro-industrial provinces of Eurasia and ones which were quite rapidly, if only partially deindustrialised at the beginning of the nineteenth century.” Implicit in Abu Taleb’s fantasy of transparent communication with his landlady is an idea of how their everyday lives were joined by Britain’s prolonged military engagements, which indeed transformed domestic institutions,


10. Bayly, “Ireland,” 378. Bayly cites Abu Taleb’s astute observation that “the poverty of the peasants, or common people, in this country [Ireland], is such, that the peasants of India are rich when compared to them.” The Indian traveler also notes industrial Cork’s widespread poverty and filth despite its centrality for international trade: “The situation of the city is also so low, that you scarcely discover it till you come close to it.” See Abu Taleb, The Travels, 100, 96.
economies, and populations, through much of the world, from the outbreak of the Seven Years War in 1756 to the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815.  

A Persian Prince’s Irish Affiliations

Abu Taleb was among the first generation of Mughal administrators to adapt British rule in India to Persianate imperial culture. Born in 1752 in Lucknow, he hailed from an Azerbaijani Turkic family that left Isfahan to work for the north Indian state of Awadh. His father, Haji Muhammad Beg Khan (d. 1768), and other relatives held respectable positions in this Shi’ite administration, until he fell out of favor with the ruler, who seized his wealth and property and imprisoned the young Abu Taleb; the father fled to Bengal, which was effectively under British rule. The son, on his release, joined his father there, and both worked for the EIC until Abu Taleb returned to Lucknow, commencing a checkered career as a land-revenue collector, on the accession of a new ruler, Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula. Abu Taleb, many times forced to flee the court to avoid factional intrigues, found temporary employment at Awadh, thanks to the patronage of Governor-General Charles Cornwallis. Falling, however, into poverty, debt, and depression, Abu Taleb decided to join his friend Captain David Thomas Richardson—a Scots military officer and Persian translator for the EIC—on his return trip to Britain. They left Calcutta in February of 1799 and disembarked at Cork, en route to Dublin through the towns of Fermoy, Clonmel, Kilkenny, and Carlow, all of which Abu Taleb graphically describes in *The Travels*. They arrived in London, via Holyhead and Chester, in January 1800. In Cork, a hub for commercial and naval shipping, Abu Taleb met up with an old acquaintance, Captain William Massey Baker, who had fought against the Rohillas and alongside the nawab of Awadh’s forces when Abu Taleb was at Lucknow. The captain invited him to his country house, Fortwilliam (named after Fort William in Bengal), where he was warmly received by the Baker family and met the Indian travel writer Dean

Mahomet, then comfortably settled among his elite Anglo-Irish patrons. It is in this context that Abu Taleb saw Ireland as a land of *ajam or Persian speakers, a term that Muzaffar Alam defines as “the non-Arab world of eastern Islam” and that Mana Kia associates with a precolonial, Persianate ethics.

Like his ancestors, Abu Taleb traveled to a foreign land for employment, in his case hoping that the government would sponsor his plan to serve as director of a proposed Persian language institute—a madrasa—in Oxford or London. Because his plan was to teach EIC recruits the lingua franca of the Mughal empire, the backing of lobbies involved in Indian affairs was crucial, hence the prominence in *The Travels* of key empire builders such as Lord Cornwallis and Henry Dundas, Viscount Melville. As lord lieutenant of Ireland, Cornwallis had crushed the Irish rebels in 1798 and, as governor-general of India, had defeated Tipu Sultan in 1792; he was thus inevitably an emblem of the fate that united the Indians and the Irish. Dundas, who had been president of the Parliament’s Board of Control that regulated the EIC, was, at the time of Abu Taleb’s visit, the secretary of state, conducting operations against Napoleonic France. When in town, Abu Taleb met Cornwallis in Dublin Castle on a weekly basis and Dundas at his Wimbledon country house a few weeks after having met King George III and Queen Charlotte. Among these elites, Abu Taleb was known as the “Persian Prince,” a title conferred on him by the metropolitan media. One might well suspect the anglophilic impulses of a foreign “prince” in need of aristocratic imperial support.

Upon his return to Calcutta in August 1803, Abu Taleb began writing his travelogue from personal notes and letters that he had sent to friends. A copy was procured by a Bengal army captain, transcribed in Allahabad by a *munshi* (a learned secretary), then transported to England by a lieutenant-colonel and selectively translated into English by Charles Stewart, who was the Irish son of a British army captain, an ex-officer of the Bengal army, and a professor of Persian...

12. On Abu Taleb’s chance meeting with Dean Mahomet, see Fisher, *First Indian*, 239–40. Abu Taleb describes him as a fellow “Muslim,” failing to note Mahomet’s conversion to Anglican Christianity.


sian, Arabic, and Hindustani at the EIC’s Haileybury College near London after a stint (1800–6) as professor of Persian at Fort William College in Calcutta. In its review of the first edition of The Travels, the Annual Register proposed that publication of the Persian original in South Asia would inspire in “the minds of the natives . . . impressions highly favourable to the British nation, and to its interest in India.” Likewise, in the Quarterly Review, the parish priest and future bishop of Calcutta Reginald Heber claimed that the publication would disseminate British and Christian values, inducing “a spirit of imitation among those who before [had] considered Europeans a race of warlike savages.” Abu Taleb’s positive representations of “British heroism by land and sea” would promote “enlightened policy” and inspire Indian “protectors or imitators” of European culture. In this respect, his travelogue should be received as “a very agreeable present to the Western world.”

Such perceptions were fostered by the author, who hoped that European innovations in politics, technology, and science “might with great advantage be imitated by Mohammedans” (59). He portrayed himself as an emissary of the Enlightenment, a man of letters and arms, as reflected in the frontispiece to Stewart’s editions: the engraved portrait of a gallant Abu Taleb wearing an Indian robe, turban, and a sash around his waist, standing beside an open book, written in Persian, yet holding a saber in his hand (see Fig. 1). Based on a portrait painted by James Northcote, this engraving foregrounds the confident Indian against the background of a cavalry charge: galloping horses and elephants surrounded by fire, smoke, and darkness—a distant wartime landscape that distracts the subject’s inquisitive side glance away from the civilian viewer. The saber suggests anticipation of an imminent fight, and his pose captures a balance between repose and action, ease and suspense. Whoever chose this engraving as the frontispiece surely thought it conveyed the marriage of martial and intellectual ideals that Abu Taleb claimed that Britons admired. Perhaps inspired by these ideals and the reviewers’ proposal, the EIC, “convinced of the policy of disseminating such a work among Natives of the British Dominions in the East, ordered the Original

18. In a letter dated September 25, 1800, Northcote says that the book pictured in the portrait is written in Persian characters and has a comical meaning, as related to him by Abu Taleb. Although I was unable to decipher the small print, the suggestion seems to be that the portrait parodies the military and intellectual ideals of Georgian Britain. See Fables, Original and Selected. By the Late James Northcote, RA, 2nd series (London: John Murray, 1833), xli.
19. Using the passive voice, Abu Taleb writes that, “during my residence in London, no less than six pictures were taken of me, the greater number of which were said to be very good likenesses.” From these portraits, “Mr. Northcote’s was esteemed the finest picture” (134). Five of the six artists who painted his portrait were Henry Edridge (1769–1821), Arthur William Devis (1763–1822), Samuel Drummond (1765–1844), William Ridley (1764–1818), and James Northcote (1746–1831). I have not been able to identify the reference to the sixth artist, a “Mr. Jesit” (134: see editor’s note).
in the Persian language to be printed” (58). The Persian edition—prepared for publication by Abu Taleb’s son, Mirza Hasein Ali, and an assistant munshi, both employed at Fort William College—appeared in 1812 and was reissued in 1827 and 1836.20

Publication of The Travels was enabled by a budgetary provision of the 1813 EIC Charter Act: “A sum of not less than one lac of rupees . . . annually applied to the revival and improvement of literature, and the encouragement of the learned natives of India.”21 Not specifying the languages involved, this ambiguous provision allowed Abu Taleb’s text to function on two levels: the Persian original could spread British values among “learned natives,” while the English translation could educate Europeans and prospective EIC recruits. Charles Stewart promoted the

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use of translated Arabic and Persian works to instruct EIC servants, as is evident in his published catalog of Tipu Sultan’s confiscated library. This huge collection of books and manuscripts is said to have “utility and importance” for Fort William College, whose twofold mission was to teach Indian languages and promote Oriental studies in Europe. Stewart’s selective translation of the Masir-i Talibi sought to make Orientalism a respectable discipline, which European scholars likewise supported in translating his work into French, Dutch, and German. To create a favorable impression, Stewart omitted many of the Persian verses inserted by the author (Stewart was unable to translate them), reordered some sections of the text, conformed it to the factual prose style of European travelogues, and cut detailed information on the Dublin theater that English readers might find tedious or crude.

Despite its amenability to British uses, the text’s status as “a very agreeable present to the Western world” is, at least retrospectively, ironic. As Nigel Leask points out, Abu Taleb’s self-confident voice differs considerably from those of later nineteenth-century Indian writers, who were intimidated by the European conviction of superiority to a retrograde India. Abu Taleb wrote his travelogue to disseminate cosmopolitan Persianate values, just as his plan for a Persian learning institute was intended to spread “cultivation of the Persian language all over the [British] kingdom” (124). He moreover published an anthology of Persian poetry, biographies of poets, a history of India, and a work on astronomy to educate Persian-speaking British and Indian elites in the Mughal ethos of polite learning.

22. Charles Stewart, A Descriptive Catalogue of the Oriental Library of the Late Tipoo Sultan of Mysore (Cambridge: Longman, 1809), i. On Stewart’s English translation of Abu Taleb’s text as furthering Fort William College’s publication mission, see Das, Sahibs and Munshis, 75. The college hired Stewart to catalog Tipu Sultan’s library, deposited there by Governor-General Richard Wellesley in 1799 (88). Stewart translated many Persian and Arabic works into English that were held in this collection.


25. Abu Taleb’s travelogue is written in the Persian travel genre safar nama or “wonder book.” On this genre, see Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyan, Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400–1800 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Abu Taleb wrote many works in Persian besides his travelogue, including Divan-i-Hafiz (1791), an edition of the poetry of Hafiz; Khulasat-ul-Afkar (Purest of Thoughts, 1791–92), a biographical study of almost five hundred ancient and modern Persian poets; Tafzihul-Gaffilin (Exposure of the Negligent, 1797), a critical history of the Lucknow ruler Asaf-ud-daulah; Mirj-al-Taubid (1804), a metrical treatise on astronomy, with prose commentary; a history of the kings of India (a manuscript now lost); and a collection of poems based on his London travels. He also edited a brief global history, titled Lubh al-Siyar a Jahan Nama (Essence of the Survey and Book of the World).
indeed suggests that it was read as a tacit argument against anglicization in British India.

Still more ironic, I think, is that Abu Taleb’s “very agreeable present to the Western world” was in large part an expression of his love for an oppressed and colonized people—the Irish. It is no accident that the text was translated by an Irish scholar, and it is worth observing that Abu Taleb’s affection for the Irish (mainly the elite Anglo-Irish) began before his arrival in Ireland. During his forty-four-day stay in Dublin, Abu Taleb reserved his highest praise for Sir George Shee, Baronet of Dunmore, and his wife, Lady Elizabeth Maria Shee, whom he married in India. Shee was British resident and revenue collector at Farrukhabad from 1778 to 1782 and, after his return home in 1788, surveyor-general of Ireland. A friend of the Irish politician Edmund Burke, Shee supplied incriminating evidence against Warren Hastings during the impeachment trial and kept a hand in Indian affairs despite Hastings’s acquittal in 1795. Abu Taleb writes that “the Governor of Ireland . . . was a great favorite with Lord Cornwallis, and did me the honour of being my interpreter with his Lordship” (116). He also mentions pleasurable conversations with a Persian-speaking friend whom he knew from Lucknow, Sir George Wombwell, who “was much attached to the natives of India, and spoke their language fluently” (117). Wombwell was a colonel for the Norfolk Volunteer Militia stationed in Dublin, and his father had served as EIC director in 1766–68 and 1775–78.

Despite these elite Irish connections, Abu Taleb’s sympathy extended eventually to every class of Irish society. This identification, however, was inflected by his aristocratic self-presentation:

For some time after my arrival in Dublin, I was greatly incommoded by the common people crowding round me, whenever I went out. They were all very curious to see me, but had no intention of offending me. Some said I must be the Russian General, who had been for some time expected; others affirmed I was either a German or Spanish nobleman; but the greater part agreed that I was a Persian Prince. One day, a great crowd having assembled about me, a shopkeeper advised me to walk into his house, and to sit down till they should disperse. I accepted his kind invitation, and went into the shop, where I amused myself by looking at some penknives, scissors, &c. The people however thronged so about his windows, that several of the panes were broken; and the crowd being very great, it was in vain to ask who had done it. (114)

This passage stages Abu Taleb’s entrance into what Mary Louise Pratt calls the “contact zone,” those “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power.”

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assumes the peculiar position of an exotic yet empowered subject, a refined Indian amid common Dubliners who “incommoded” him. They comprise an ignorant rabble that confuses him for a Russian, a German, a Spaniard, or a Persian prince, but they are basically good people, expressing nothing but curiosity—certainly not xenophobia—and meaning no offense. To underscore this point, he introduces into his account the hospitable and protective Irish shopkeeper who sheltered him in his home. Although the Indian remains aloof from his middle-class host, he sympathizes with the man’s interests by reporting his own concern about the broken window panes.

As Abu Taleb refashions his identity in his text, as a stranger in a strange land, he is careful to discredit the anti-Irish prejudices of the English and to stress Indo-Irish affinities. Although he notes that the English at home are more courteous and hospitable to him than the English in India and that he enjoys the friendship of the Scots above that of other Europeans, he devotes much attention to examples of Irish civility toward foreigners (119). In particular, he rejects English misrepresentations of the Irish “as rude, irascible, and savage” (118) and relates anecdotes about their generosity. After parting with Captain Richardson, who left Ireland for England, Abu Taleb “trusts” himself, as he puts it, “entirely among strangers” and finds that they behave as friends. The Irish are happy to interpret for him, and as a result he makes “much more progress in acquiring the English language” than he could do in England, the Irish being better able to comprehend his “broken English.” A hostess in Cork provides him with a free dinner; Dubliners escort him home to ensure his safety. Drunken Irishmen, he says, never quarrel, duel, or display “the smallest impropriety.” Two Irish gentleman and a woman rescue him from an opportunistic English innkeeper at Holyhead (95, 100–101, 111–12, 119). The Irish may be a bit short on “prudence and sound judgment,” but “in bravery and determination, hospitality, prodigality, freedom of speech and openheartedness, they surpass the English and Scotch” (111). Abu Taleb’s Dublin, furthermore, recalls familiar Indian scenes: the public statues resemble Hindu idols; the plaza is similar to “a Hindu chook [market]”; the glowing glass vases in chemists’ shops are like Lucknow’s illuminated Imambara, the home of an imam and a site of Shi’ite devotion; the River Liffey is as big as the Gomti in Lucknow; the lighting on the bridge appears like the lamps used to decorate the Indian nobility’s marriage celebrations; the canals contain “boats resembling our budgerows”; and the Trinity College Library houses classic Persian works (104–7, 126). Implicitly, Abu Taleb places a colonial capital, Dublin, on a par with a Mughal city, Lucknow. The Ireland of his imagination is highly civilized and compatible with his Indo-Muslim Persian heritage.

27. Abu Taleb’s comparison of a Dublin plaza with “a Hindu chook [market]” appears only in the Persian edition of Travels in Europe, 125.
By contrast, England is shown in The Travels to be a decadent imperial culture—inconsistent, degenerate, and regressive. Limiting his observations to a London society teeming with “vicious people,” the Indian traveler provides lists of English virtues and vices, the latter longer than the former, in the form of self-negating opposites (208). Under English vices, he lists irreligion and philosophical atheism; pride and insolence; crass materialism, love of money, luxury, and extravagant spending; laziness and discourtesy; irritable temper; wasting time in grooming, eating, bathing, dressing, and pursuing fashions and leisure activities; arrogance in the assertion of knowledge; selfishness; unchastity, especially among women; and intolerance of different cultures and religions. Even most of the English virtues have the appearance of defects. The honor put on show by the upper classes might be understood as vanity; their reverence for superior attainments in virtue and knowledge, understood as pride. English industriousness in inventing machinery reduces the need for labor but in the process encourages sloth. As for the unmitigated English virtues, such as sincerity, plain manners, and hospitableness, they pertain more to England’s past than to its present. Abu Taleb diagnoses London, the imperial metropolis, as suffering from effeminacy, akin to that of the Mughal, Ottoman, and Roman empires in their decline. The capital evinces an Eastern-style addiction to wealth, pleasure, and power, at the expense of an overtaxed populace on the brink of rebellion (181, 217). This sickness can be cured, he advises, only through the masculine kind of asceticism practiced by Arabian and Tartar warriors and especially by virtuous rulers on the model of Ali, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, and Tamerlane (212–13). In short, the English are said to lack the virtue of javanmard, an Islamicate moral ideal of martial chivalry, courage, strength, restraint, generosity, and philanthropy.28

The Irish, on the other hand, are said to have realized this essentially Persian virtue. To explain this peculiarity, Abu Taleb turns to comparative philology, apparently inspired by Charles Vallancey, the British surveyor of Ireland, who was among the military personnel whom he met through Wombell. Vallancey’s argument was that Gaelic culture was of Indo-Persian origin, and Abu Taleb praised him as “a great adept in acquiring languages, . . . much delighted with the Hebrew, Arabic, and Persian dialects: he informed me that there was a considerable analogy between the Hindoostany and Irish languages” (117). Vallancey indeed published many books stretching pseudoetymological correlations to construct an Eastern heritage for the ancient Irish. According to him, the Irish were Phoenician-Scythians who had migrated from India or Egypt (the home of Druidic Brahmins) to Ireland via Iran, Africa, and Spain. His theory

combined the Orientalist scholarship of Sir William Jones, Thomas Maurice, and Francis Wilford with research on Celtic artifacts, architecture, myth, history, and language in order to argue for Ireland’s exalted pedigree. Scholars now dismiss Vallancey’s theory as eccentric, but his account of pan-Oriental diffusion was not unusual: he adhered to the scholarly norms of the time and was taken seriously both by English proponents of an Eastern Druid past for the British Isles and by Irish patriots trying to combat London’s anti-Irish prejudices, trade restrictions on Ireland, and laws barring Irish employment in high official posts. Vallancey’s works circulated widely among Irish intellectuals keen on transcolonial links between Orientalism and Celticism and on alternative models of imperial governance. In his conversations with Vallancey, a short man with “a most expanded heart,” Abu Taleb would have discovered a historical rationale for his feeling of kinship with the Irish, his uncanny sense that Dublin resembled Indian cities, and his belief that the Irish embodied the Persianate ideal of virtuous social comportment and hospitality to outsiders.

Abu Taleb’s love for Ireland was reciprocated, and the Hibernia Magazine reprinted his account of the Irish character. Some of the reciprocation, however, was untoward: a pamphlet titled The History of Mirza Abul Hassan Khan, anonymously published in Dublin by “An Irish Officer in the Service of Persia” in 1819, places the Persian ambassador to England in 1809–10 in Ireland, which he never visited. Having supposedly learned “broken English” from “a young Irishman, who was sent [to Iran] by a great commercial house in London,” the ambassador experiences much “affability and hospitality” in Ireland, a place that reminds him of Iran and its classical poets. The ambassador is said to be a great admirer of Hafiz, the last and best of the Persian poets, whose sonnets can be compared to nothing but the effusions of our countryman, [Thomas] Moore. On hearing some of the productions of the Irish poet, which were read to him at Bilton’s Hotel [in Dublin], he immediately observed the similarity.


31. On the ideal of ajam as linked to hospitality in Persian travelogues of this period, see Kia, “Limning the Land,” 64.


33. Anon. (“An Irish Officer, in the Service of Persia”), The History of Mirza Abul Hassan Khan, the Persian Ambassador, with Some Account of the Fair Circassian (Dublin: Thomas Christopher Clifford, Stephen’s-Green, 1819), 6–7, 16, 18–19.

34. History of Mirza Abul Hassan Khan, 18.
Moreover, “the noble Persian visited the Theatre, and applauded very loudly the national air of Patrick’s Day” (18).

It is apparent that the pamphlet’s author confused Abul Hassan Khan, whose life was sensationalized in the writings of James Morier and more generally by the British press, with Abu Taleb Khan, who published a collection of Hafiz’s poetry and claimed that his Irish landlady could “understand my disfigured translations of Persian poetry” in “broken English” (111). The confusion in and surrounding The History of Mirza Abul Hassan Khan suggests that Abu Taleb’s xenophilic views may have been widespread among the Persian knowledge community in Ireland, just as, more certainly, it suggests that the curiosity of the Irish about Persia, India, and Islam was earnest and extensive. Joseph Lennon has argued that Irish attraction to the Orient at this time was “a mutually imagined link similar to later cross-colony identifications between Irish and Asian writers and nationalists,” but, unlike later writers, Abu Taleb extended his sympathies as well to London Orientalists, who “by uncommon perseverance acquired such knowledge of Persian, as to be able to translate freely from that language.” Still, the ease of translation from Persian to English was facilitated, he believed, not so much by the British imperial presence in India as by Ireland’s being the bridgehead of a culture imported into Europe from the East.

The Travels realigns the relations of metropole and colony in such a way that Ireland is not only an analogue for “what may happen (or is already happening) to India under British rule,” as David Simpson argues, but also a prototype for a modern Europe that is uncannily similar to a Muslim-Persianate culture of the past. The persona of the “Persian Prince” transforms Abu Taleb and his Irish hosts into subjects not of the British empire but of a cosmopolitan Eurasia, extending from Mughal India to Celtic Britain and bound together by transregional communication systems: trade, poetry, and a courtly lingua franca. From this perspective, the Irish, whom he regards as mostly moderate practitioners of their religion, share the Persianate Shi’ite views expressed in his travelogue, which is,

35. James Morier mentions Abul Hassan Khan’s 1809–10 embassy in A Journey through Persia, Armenia, and Asia Minor to Constantinople, in the Years 1808 and 1809 (London, 1812), which likely influenced the anonymous Dublin pamphlet. Another possible influence is Mir Ja’far, one of the Iranian students whose London life Green recounts in Love of Strangers. In a newspaper interview, Ja’far expressed admiration for Thomas Moore’s Lalla Rookh (1817), although he (and the five other students in Green’s account) never visited Ireland (Green, Love of Strangers, 278).

36. Lennon, Irish Orientalism, 130. The second quotation refers to the London Orientalist and Anglo-Irishman Sir William Ouseley (later involved in Abul Hassan Khan’s embassy). Another London Orientalist whom Abu Taleb praises is Lady Mary Elford, the wife of the artist and politician Sir William Elford. According to the Indian traveler, “she made a large collection of [his] Odes” and behaved as if English and Persian were virtually identical (Abu Taleb, The Travels, 135).

37. David Simpson, Romanticism and the Question of the Stranger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 216. Simpson is reiterating O’Quinn’s argument: that Abu Taleb’s account of Irish poverty “suggests that, in order to meet the demands of metropolitan luxury, Indian people, like the Irish, will be impoverished and embattled under British rule.” See O’Quinn, “Introduction,” 35.
after all, a pilgrimage narrative: after leaving Britain in June of 1802 during the Peace of Amiens (a one-year truce between Britain and France), Abu Taleb traveled to Paris and from there to Greece, Malta, and Turkey en route to Baghdad, where he worshipped at the shrines of Shi’ite imams before sailing for Bombay. Along the way, he vilifies intolerant Sunnis, especially the Turks, and sympathizes with tolerant Shi’ites suffering under Ottoman despotism and living in poverty amid the dilapidated shrines of their revered martyrs (280–88, 292, 300, 317). His odd belief that the British Empire should adopt Imam Ali’s acetic warrior code expresses a wish that the foreign sovereign of Ireland behave toward its Irish subjects less as Sunni rulers have behaved in their oppressive relationship with Shi’ites. Hence Abu Taleb’s particular interest in, and detailed reportage on, a simulation that he attended in Dublin of the British siege of Seringapatam: he assumed that the Irish audience, among whom he sat, found the death of a South Indian ruler onstage as affecting as he was finding it and that they identified with the Indo-Muslim cause that Tipu Sultan had died recently while defending.

Tipu Sultan on the Dublin Stage

Running from December 18 to 20 of 1799, Philip Astley’s hippodrama The Siege and Storming of Seringapatam; Or the Death of Tippoo Saib at the Dublin Amphitheatre Royal mixed news and entertainment to dramatize General George Harris’s speedy takeover of the Seringapatam fortress on May 4 of that year. As advertised in the Hibernian Journal and a playbill, Astley’s eclectic circus promised new songs, “stage amusements,” clowning acts, and “new feats of horsemanship,” concluding “with, never performed, a grand historical spectacle” on Tipu’s death, featuring “new dresses, extensive new scenery, machinery, new music, &c. &c. and which it is presumed cannot be excelled by any Theatre whatever.” Although the show was first staged in London and was the latest in a series of plays on the Anglo-Mysore wars, the advertisement capitalized on its novelty, variety, and realism not only to attract audiences and generate a huge profit but also to sell the idea, in post-rebellion Dublin, of Britain’s technological and military superiority over its backward dominions. Typical of the illegitimate theater and of Astley’s business acumen, The Siege fused a vast repertoire of legitimate dramas, mainly historical tragedies, with less respectable entertainments, such as equestrian acrobatics

38. In his travelogue, Abu Taleb does not report on his experience of the London playhouses with anything like the same interest, color, and detail, though he notes his enthusiasm for the city’s operas.


and the panorama, to simulate the wartime experience for spectators removed geographically and temporally from the scene of action. Astley developed his own dramaturgy of war, drawing on his practical knowledge as a seasoned British soldier and on the latest military intelligence. The innovations he introduced for The Siege came out of the tradition of the late Georgian circus, which was “a product of London in the aftermath of the Seven Years’ War.” In its Dublin context, the circus was meant to celebrate Britain’s ideological triumph over the French Revolution, signaled by the dual defeat in battle of the Irish rebels in 1798 and of Tipu Sultan in 1799.

Tipu had formed an alliance with Napoleon, who, after sending an unsuccessful expedition of French troops in 1798 to assist the rebels in Ireland, planned to invade India via Egypt. Many Britons thus considered Tipu’s defeat a major blow both against the Irish, who denied “their legitimate sovereign,” and against France (228). In the grip of the patriotic fervor that followed on the fall of Seringapatam, five London newspapers, in February 1800, reported that Abu Taleb was “one of the Indian Chiefs engaged against the late Tippoo Sultaun” and that, as such, he had given the British secretary of state, Henry Dundas, “a curious dagger, stained with the blood which flowed on the ramparts of Seringapatam, on the memorable day on which the Sultaun fell.” These reports mistakenly assume that Abu Taleb, a member of the Lucknow elite, was a military officer from the court of the nizam of Hyderabad whose armed forces had fought alongside the EIC’s against the sultan of Mysore. Yet the bloody dagger remains an undeciphered piece of memorabilia. Whose blood was on the blade? Was it used to kill Tipu Sultan and his guards? Or was the blood that of a slaughtered British soldier? And what is the significance of gifting this ambiguous signifier to Dundas, a man both lauded and reviled in the British press for directing the wartime effort against Napoleonic France and its ally, “Citizen” Tipu? Only one aspect of the gift to Dundas seems clear: Abu Taleb capitalized on nationalist propaganda to cast himself as an ally of the British empire, manipulating media representations to project a positive self-image among potential patrons. He was showing off as a refined collector of the weaponry found in British-occupied Seringapatam. Imperial collecting, as Maya Jasanoff argues, permitted individuals to secure prestige, lucrative jobs, and patronage, although confiscated Mysorean

41. Russell, Theatres of War, 180.
43. Lloyd’s Evening Post (February 7–10, 1800); Morning Post and Gazetteer (February 8, 1800); Whitehall Evening Post (1700) (February 6–8, 1800); London Chronicle or Universal Evening Post (February 6–8, 1800); St. James’s Chronicle or the British Evening Post (February 6–8, 1800). The first quotation appears in all of these newspapers, but the second appears only in St. James’s Chronicle.
objects “were invested with distinctly mixed messages.” Given that Tipu was also an avid collector of objects pillaged from his enemies’ territories, Abu Taleb’s apparent token of esteem could signify, among other things, his sense of Dundas’s likeness to the English stereotype of the violent Oriental despot.

Abu Taleb’s self-representation was formed at the peak of Tipumania. British statesmen had redescribed England as more Western than postrevolutionary France, which at the time was reeling after its failure to establish an Islamic republic in Egypt: Admiral Nelson had defeated Napoleon’s fleet at Aboukir in July 1798. Abu Taleb records the joy he felt at the Lord Mayor of London’s feast in honor of Nelson, who appeared wearing a diamond chelengk given him by the British-allied Ottoman sultan, Selim III. In its coverage of this event, the Oracle and Daily Advertiser reported that Chamberlain Clarke presented Nelson (“the gallant Hero of the Nile”) with a diamond-studded, crocodile-style sword for having checked the French-Mysore threat. Casting the war between Britain and France as an age-old conflict between the Hellenic West and the Iranian East, Clarke in his speech compared Nelson’s fleet to the Greek fleet that had crushed the Persian navy at Salamis in 480 BC. Daniel O’Quinn argues that Abu Taleb negotiated the geopolitics of this festive occasion by countering Clarke’s speech, which asserted Christian superiority, with Persian verses from Hafiz, but an obvious point needs stressing here: in comparing the feast with Hafiz’s description of godless wine drinkers recreating the world (“Let us overturn the present system of the Universe, and form / a new Creation of our own”), Abu Taleb identifies England with Persia in its irreligious arrogance and decadence (198). Seated across from Nelson, Abu Taleb understood the Ottoman chelengk and Egyptian sword as belonging to a British imperial culture that was inherently Oriental. These exotic possessions told him a story about precarious Englishness in flux.

It is in the context of Tipumania, I believe, that Abu Taleb’s gift to Dundas disrupted, as much as reinforced, British patriotic affect. The bloody dagger recalls the use of such props in the Dublin theater simulation that Abu Taleb had visited more than a month before. The following advertisement summarizes the show:


45. On British anxieties over Napoleon’s establishment of an Islamic republic in Egypt, see Garcia, Islam and the English Enlightenment, 137–43.

46. “Lord Mayor’s Feast (Oracle and Daily Advertiser, November 11, 1800),” in The Travels, 381–84.

47. See O’Quinn, “Introduction,” 42–44, for his interpretation of Abu Taleb’s participation in the Lord Mayor’s Feast.
In the course of this interesting spectacle the following scenery will be displayed:

1. A view of an Indian sea port.
2. A view near the River Cavery.
3. The Banqueting Garden of Tipoo Sultan.
4. The Commander in Chief, General Harris’s Marque.
5. A correct view of the city of Seringapatam, the whole of Tipoo’s army, elephants, camels, &c. in motion together with the Mysore Army, consisting of Peadars, Bungaries, Sirdars, &c. forming the camp near Fort Periapatam.
6. A British battery opening a brisk fire on Tippoo’s advanced guard; particularly the blow up of a pow[der] mill.
7. The fortifications and city of Seringapatam, with the springing of a mine.
8. External view of Tippoo’s palace, and his two son[s] firing from the windows.
9. The Zenanna and City on Fire. With a variety of Circumstances which attended this important Conquest.48

The movable scenery displayed in Dublin’s Amphitheatre Royal encouraged the audience to identify with the viewpoint of General Harris and the British army. Seeing as Astley borrowed this visual technique from Robert Ker Porter’s popular panorama of these events (shown concurrently in the provinces and in Ireland) in order to create a realistic impression of spectators participating in the war, the audience might be expected as well to have identified with the propagandistic ideal of the citizen-soldier fighting and dying for his country. From the distant opening scene of an Indian seaport to the close-up concluding view of the burning city and zenana (the separate living quarters for women), the battle is represented through what O’Quinn calls a “telescopic effect”: a phantasmagoric movement from distance to proximity that “melts the audience into a patriotic amalgam,” while it transports them visually to a battleground far from London.49 In Dublin, however, this theatrical illusion was removed from the metropole, though close to the combat zone: an inverted telescopic effect. The spectacular blowups, Tipu’s sons helplessly firing back on British troops, and the burning zenana recall scenes from Cornwallis’s cavalry charge, in Ireland, in 1798. By motivating spectators in the theater to sympathize with disindividualized EIC regiments, the Dublin production collapsed the nearby and distant war fronts; the enemy in both, whether Irish or Indian, underestimated English military prowess at their peril. Hence Abu Taleb’s reaction to the show, which may have been shared by the rest of the audience,

feeling mindlessly overawed into submission by theatrical realism: “The representation was so correct, that everything appeared natural; and the conclusion was very affecting” (110). Still, this response does not necessarily imply Abu Taleb’s support for the rhetoric of the heroic citizen-soldier or his belief in the historical inevitability of British triumph, whether in the East or in Persianate Ireland. As Neil Ramsey has shown, Porter’s panorama of the siege of Seringapatam elicited a wide range of affective responses from viewers, ranging from a patriotic sense of communal belonging to horror at the sight of bloodshed. At all events, never identifies, in his description of the simulation, with General Harris and his Madras army.

Unlike Stewart’s redacted English translation, the Persian edition of The Travels includes a vivid summary of the simulated battle, in which the sultan was the clear focal point of Abu Taleb’s attention:

First they showed Srirangapatna’s beautiful garden where Tipu Sultan and his children and close confidants were sitting on seats watching women performers dance, while servants, each in their own clothes of Indian design, stood in a line. At that moment one of the French commanders that served him arrived and gave news of the approaching English army. Tipu began preparing for the siege and sent a few regiments out to attack the English. The makeup of that army—consisting of hundreds of riders and foot soldiers and elephant[s] and cannon[s]—was made to look like the original army seen from a distance. In reality [however] we saw that it was all fictitious and not real. Having closed in, therefore, both armies started to battle. After much effort Tipu’s army was defeated. This group [of soldiers] was [composed of] real people: close to two hundred real actors of that playhouse who shot real guns and artillery without ammunition at one another. Lines of red and the pouring of blood from the sword and knife wounds of the injured could be seen, and the bodies of those who had been killed fell to the ground. In the end we saw the castle of Serirangapatna, with the exact same splendor [that it has in reality], surrounded by the English army . . . and shot with cannonballs until some of its towers were destroyed from artillery damage. From every direction regiments placed ladders and climbed onto the walls and a large English regiment prepared to attack the gates. [At that point] Tipu arrived with a special regiment to stop them. They fought with fury in the ruins of the river—which was like a protective moat on that side—as well as other strong places. After being unable [to stop the English] they returned to the castle. An English regiment followed from behind and much struggle ensued at the gates and most of them—including Sultan Tipu,
who could be seen with his bejeweled royal clothing and turban—were killed there and the story came to a close.51

Written for an Indian audience, this description stresses the artificiality of seeing a distant war up close: Tipu’s massive army in scene five “was made to look like the original army seen from a distance,” but “we saw that it was all fictitious and not real.”

The “we” here indicates Abu Taleb’s identification with the skeptical Dublin audience, a community of spectators who would have seen self-consciously through this propaganda-in-performance. The Persian edition, interestingly, provides a detailed layout of the seating arrangements, stage, painted curtains, movable scenery panels, lighting, and physical dimensions of Dublin’s Theatre Royal in Crow Street and the Amphitheatre Royal in Peter Street, complete with Abu Taleb’s diagram of the Crow Street building (see Fig. 2). Having been recently redesigned for staging elaborate scenic displays, these renovated theaters were for Abu Taleb “magician houses” endemic to “all of Farang” (a Persian word for “Franks” or Europeans). As he writes, “The paintings and images and opening and closing of these curtains enchant one more than the story and acting, and make the stage (like sorcery and magic) seem like a dream and fantasy.”52

The architectural space, he implies, is more socially meaningful than the play itself. The spatial segregation of classes according to types of seat and viewing proximity to the stage is especially noteworthy for him: “The audience is divided into . . . Boxes, Pits, and Gallery: the first of these is intended for the nobility and gentry, the second for the tradesman, and the third for the lower classes” (109). He notes that the boxes have private entrances and that “city notables rent most of them and the owner of the house, out of desire for gold, gives it to them at half price for ten or twenty years.”53

Presumably seated in one of these rented boxes, Abu Taleb would have been well positioned to observe how the Anglo-Irish, predominantly Protestant theaters of Dublin were laid out and functioned. As sites, for centuries, of political and religious contestation, including occasional “riotous performances”54—flare-ups of anti-English, anti-imperial protest—these imports from London were venues for imagining a national identity for Ireland outside union with Great Britain.55

For Abu Taleb, these theaters were places in which to affirm solidarity and forge emotional bonds with an Irish “we” who could commiserate with him over Tipu’s death. Given the English political domination of both Indian and Irish cultures, and given the history of Indo-Irish contact, Dublin was for him virtually a provincial Mughal capital, akin to Lucknow. Dublin was coextensive with both the local and the global history of British military occupation. He and the assembled Dubliners could agree that the Farangis were deluded by their own self-image making during the Napoleonic wars. With reference to Astley’s loyalist circus, Abu Taleb describes the horse-riding tricks onstage as “strange techniques that the mind is reluctant to confirm”—in other words, just another instance of the magic and mimesis to be seen on a Farangi stage wide enough to fit “one to two hundred people and cannons with cannonballs” but, by no means, credible enough to fool imperial subjects in the audience.56

Before describing The Siege and Storming of Seringapatam, Abu Taleb records his impression of an unidentified harlequinade in which an evil Ethiopian magician kidnap a noblewoman, Columbine, and takes her to his country against the wishes of a fairy queen assisting her father. Columbine falls in love with the

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56. Mirza Abu Taleb Khan, The Travels, 147, 144.
magician—and her father, after losing a battle with him, reluctantly agrees to the couple’s marriage. In Stewart’s translation, Abu Taleb claims that the harlequinade’s “actors spoke in a barbarous language,” but in the Persian text what he writes is that their “words seemed exactly like the fairytales that storytellers relate” (110). The original is nonjudgmental about wondrous spectacles combining illusions (shifting scenery) with realistic props (coaches, horses, boats, and palanquins). In other words, this harlequinade is a “Strange Imitation,” akin to that of Astley’s hippodrama. Abu Taleb locates the home of the harlequin magician—a habashi (the Arabic word for African or, perhaps more precisely, Ethiopian)—in “the mountain of Qaf”: a mythical place figuring in classical Persian poetry, most prominently in Ferdowsi’s epic, the Shahnameh, a masterpiece of Iranian literature that Abu Taleb was overjoyed to find in Dublin’s Trinity College Library (107). In his English translation, Stewart removes all references to Persian fairy tales, purging the text of strange poetic elements that could make a travesty of Orientalist learning and thus of his own professional authority. Instead, he interpolates a story of actors speaking a “barbarous language” and associates the theater with backward Dubliners, easily entertained by such barbarism. Translating what Abu Taleb wrote as if a negative commentary on the harlequinade allowed Stewart to claim English metropolitan respectability, while relocating any implications of Oriental tyranny from London to Dublin.

In the original Persian text, however, Abu Taleb not only equates the Dublin theater with a sophisticated Persian literary culture but also, as I hope that I have shown, understands delusion as intrinsic to the decadent culture of England and its military adventures. In those awkward moments in which war’s theatrics are exposed, he expresses a love for Ireland that surpasses his qualified praise for a hospitable London wallowing in imperial vices: irreligion, pride, insolence, extravagance, materialism, superficial knowledge, and—most pertinent to the Irish and Indian contexts—an intolerance of others. Mediations on the colonial violence so often found in English theaters, newspapers, and visual arts dampen the author’s sense of historical, cultural, and geographical belonging when he is in London. When embedded in the media and army networks of Cork and Dublin, his writings not only trace disturbing disconnections between London and its war-ravaged colonies but also map the latter onto a precolonial Persianate history and geography. For the Indo-Persian stranger, Ireland seemed a home away from home. As English anxieties over Britain’s fiscal-military state became more poignant, terrifying, incomprehensible, and alienating, Irish and Indian ideas of civilizational difference became more malleable, yielding to mutually xenophilic

57. Mirza Abu Taleb Khan, Travels in Europe, 150.

58. Mirza Abu Taleb Khan, Travels in Europe, 148, 149. In Ferdowsi’s Shahnameh, Rostam’s father, Zal, is discovered
feelings incompatible with an English patriotic discourse that was aloof from, if still haunted by, the devastating effects of imperial warfare. In *The Travels*, war is too dreadful to describe. It is silently present in the lives of generous Irish subalterns who, in Abu Taleb's imagination, return their love in the form of an unconditional invitation to be among them while remaining wholly other and strange.

as a baby by the mythical bird Simorgh and taken to her nest on Mt. Qaf.