Edmonds C. J.,
East and West of Zagros. Travel, War and Politics in Persia and Iraq 1913-1921.
ed. with intro. by Yann Richard.

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This book by the late C.J. Edmonds, a former British civil servant, about his years of service in Iran and Iraq is a great and important addition to our knowledge of this area and period. Most of the events described or referred to are known, of course, but the very personal discussion by the author of these events, who provides background, on-the-ground perceptions, and couleur locale, gives them an unexpected depth and nuance that is missing from the dry, factual political contemporary reports that were mostly available until now. Edmonds, who was trained in Arabic, Persian and Turkish at Cambridge, relates his vicissitudes in 25 chapters that are organized in four sections (The Persian Gulf, Lower Mesopotamia, South-West Persia, and North-West Persia), which refer to the areas where he was stationed and worked.

In the first section, Edmonds explains that he was supposed to have begun his career in the Levant Consular Service in 1912, but the presence of another Edmonds at the British embassy in Istanbul meant possible confusion so that on arrival he was told he was not needed. After a wait he was transferred to Bushehr in 1913, of which he gives a very lively description: about the town itself, life at the British Residency and among the small European community as well as a view of the daily routine of a British consular officer. He also details his first mission in the field visiting the various Sheikhs in the hinterland of Bushehr, providing interesting information about the people he met. The last chapter in this section deals with the ‘prelude to the Zimmermann telegram,’ an interesting footnote to a very important event. When the text of this telegram was decoded, which was made possible because the British when they arrested the German consul in Bushehr in 1914 obtained a copy of his code book, its contents led to the US decoding it, and this was an unexpected depth and nuance that is missing from the dry, factual political contemporary reports that were mostly available until now. Edmonds, who was trained in Arabic, Persian and Turkish at Cambridge, relates his vicissitudes in 25 chapters that are organized in four sections (The Persian Gulf, Lower Mesopotamia, South-West Persia, and North-West Persia), which refer to the areas where he was stationed and worked.

In the second section, Edmonds relates his experience as a Political Officer (PO) in Iraq, where it was his task to gather intelligence and be liaison between the military and the local population with a view to keep both sides happy, if possible. In 1915, the author went to Basra, which the British has just captured. Initially, he was engaged in administrative work (coding and decoding telegrams, typing confidential letters) of which he provides some interesting examples. After the capture of Amara the author was moved to the Tigris front, right in the region of the Marsh Arabs. Edmonds provides some intimate descriptions of his companions such as mark Sykes MP as well as of the country that they travelled through, which brings to life many persons whom one only knows by name or from political reports. When Edmonds replaced Lorimer in Amara he focuses mainly on his contacts with the Bani Lam, and provides, e.g., information on its Sheikhly family, the Al Nusayri (incl. family tree) as well as on the way of life of these tribesmen. The latter he does in the form of extract of his diary for 12 days in the spring of 1916. This is followed by a vivid description of the marsh land, and how people lived there, based on his crossing of this region, which, as the editor rightly remarks, is reminiscent of Wilfred Thesiger’s description. The last chapter of this section deals with the author’s transfer to Suq al-Shuyukh, a thickly populated area on both sides of the Euphrates. Here the British had some problems with the Sheikh of the Bani Malik confederation, which was not resolved during the war despite Edmonds endeavors, some of which he relates. Edmonds regretted that he could not visit the Sabineans in his area, because after a long bout with malaria he was evacuated to Bombay for three months and then sent to Iran.

In the third section, Edmonds provides background for his new posting, Shushtar. Khuzestan and Lurestan were important because of military operations in the region of Kermanshah and Hamadan. He traveled to Dizful, of which he provides an interesting description as well as of the just, but tough manner of governing the city by his colleague Soane. Arrived in Shushtar, which like N. Khuzestan had been without effective Iranian administration, he set out to bolster the rule of the local governor, and to reduce the tribal Khans to size. Edmonds describes the city, its leading families, and the manner of life in general. He started to impose law and order on the city proper, and deported a Bakhtiyari Khan who did not heed his warnings to stop exacting illegal taxes. Interestingly, much of his intelligence about what was wrong and who did what came from the mother of the Mostawfi family, who through the harem grapevine knew exactly what was happening in the city and what the various Khans were doing. These decisive measures had a galvanizing effect and people came forward with their problems, which enabled Edmonds to settle them and thus install a sense of security and reliability in the city. It also meant an increased demand on his time and thus the governor established a court of law, headed by the Imam Jum’a. The presence of Edmonds Luri sowars and the establishment of a local police force went
far to achieve his objectives. Edmonds also refers to the
beginning of the operations of the Anglo-Persian
Oil Company (APOC) and its staff. With the British
victory over the Turks in Iraq, Edmonds was recalled
in March 1917 and with some regret he left Shustar to
go to Dizful to replace Soane. Dizful was a larger and
more commercial city and one with an interesting so-
cial organization, which Edmonds describes. Moreo-
ver, Soane had made quite an impression; an act that
was difficult to equal. Edmonds, therefore, decided
not to change too much. He describes his staff and
the manner of their operation. Outside the city, law
and order was maintained via a system of subsidies
to tribal chiefs, in which the 600 Lur troops that
Edmonds had at his disposal played a vital role. He
describes how this system of indirect control worked,
and he admits that many Bakhtiyari chiefs and Sheikh
Khaz’al did not like it and discusses their sentiments.
Edmonds used the repair of the Dizful bridge, enabled
by help from APOC engineers, to bolster good rela-
tions with the city population. Being in Dizful also
meant involvement in Lur affairs. Edmonds provides
a description of the province, its history, its local
system of government, its people and customs, and
their relations with Dizful. In a separate chapter he
introduces the reader to the Dirakvan tribal group
through his travelogue about his excursion among
them. He also traveled to Burujird describing “en
route” that he saw (Khurramabad) and experienced.
These trips were aimed at intelligence gathering as
well as inducing the Lurs to do their shopping at
Dizful and to take political guidance from there. At
Burujird, Edmonds described the strained relations
between the local population and the Russian troops,
and likewise at Nihavand. Via Kangavar he went to
Kermanshah, where he noticed the low morale of the
Russian troops, after the October Revolution, about
which he provides further details. Edmonds returned
to Khurramabad to adjudicate a matter of a robbed
caravan; “en route” he met the V ali of Pish-e Kuh,
whose habits and behavior he details. The author
then continued his journey traveling though Lures-
tan to Kermanshah, where he learns the latest news,
having been incommunicado for 3.5 months. He then
marched through Iraq down to Shustar, where shortly
thereafter he was told to relieve Noel at Ahvaz, and
to successfully negotiate with the Bakhtiyari chiefs
to ensure safety in the oil fields. Edmonds fell ill with
typhoid, was sent home to the UK, where on arrival
he was declared to be healthy, only to fall ill with the
Spanish flu. It was only in May 1919 that he was back
in Baghdad and was told in August to take up duties
as PO with Norperforce in Qazvin.

The last section details Edmonds work in N.W.
Iran. With the collapse of the Russian troops, the
British decided to maintain a military force (Norper-
force) in Iran to fill the vacuum in Transcaucasia and
NW Iran and train the local population to defend
themselves against the Turkish advance. For Edmonds
this was a happy period, he describes the most no-
table people, both British and Iranian, that he worked
with as well as his posting, Qazvin. He further gives
detailed account of the performance of a passion
play (tā’ziyā) in that city. One chapter deals with the
Jangali movement, where he describes both Gilan
province and Mirza Kuchek Khan’s aims and activi-
ties; further his visit to the small province of Khamsa
and its old feudal lord, the Afshar chief. The latter
was fond of falconry, reason why Edmonds provides
the reader with much detail about this sport and its
raptor hunters. From there the author made a brief
visit to Transcaucasia to gather information about the
fluid and changing political situation there, of which
he provides the main points, and, as always, about
the personalities he meets. From Baku, Edmonds
returns to Qazvin and takes up life as PO. The Qazvin
governor often asked Edmonds to accompany him on
inspection tours, because he had a car, and he details
whom he met during those tours and what issues the
governor needed to resolve. He further details how
matters in Gilan developed as well as describes the
developments in Tabriz, where the Tajaddud group
took over the city in April 1920. He went to Tabriz
and spoke with Sheikh Muhammad Khiyabani and
the local European diplomats and left satisfied with
the situation he had found. Edmonds was for a short
time in Tehran when he was summoned to Qazvin,
from where he flew to Anzali to assist in dealing with
a Bolshevik fleet that had bombarded this port. Later
this fleet was reinforced by a force that marched over
land from Astara. The British, therefore, decided to
withdraw their troops to Manjil. Edmonds completes
this chapter by describing further developments of
the Khiyabani and Jangali movements. From Qazvin
the British tried to induce the Iranians to take the
lead against the Bolshevik invasion in Gilan. An attack
by a Bolshevik force at Manjil was repulsed and the
Cossack Brigade took advantage of this to retake
Ra sh. This led to the fall of the Jangali movement,
and likewise the government imposed its will on
Khiyabani and retook control over Tabriz, which was
welcomed by the populace. The last chapter of this
book deals with the coup d’etat of 1921. Unfortu-
nately, Edmonds does not revolve the issue whether
the British were behind it or not, because his diary
for that period is lost. His personal recollections
suggests otherwise, which may be true, as he knew
all the actors in this play very well, amongst which
Sayyid Ziya al-Din, whom he befriended and to whom
he ascribes a larger role in the coup than is the case in the official Pahlavi version of events.

Yann Richard has provided a useful introduction to Edmunds’ Travelogue cum Memoires, putting them into historical context, among others rightly pointing out that Edmunds’ view, however sympathetic toward Iranians and Iraqis, was colored by his background and function as a British civil servant. But this makes no difference to the importance of this book, which I found most enjoyable to read; it is filled with all kinds of useful social and personal information that provides atmosphere to the telling, like a good seasoning to an excellent meal. I hope more of such similar writings by former civil servants and soldiers are found and published, because they often provide much of the meat to the skeleton constituted by official political reports and documents. Yann Richard deserves our compliments and thanks for having lifted Edmunds’ book out of oblivion.

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