

Persia in the Great Game – Sir Percy Sykes, Explorer, Consul, Soldier, Spy
by Antony Wynn. John Murray, 2003.

This meticulously researched and engagingly written biography of an archetypal British imperial figure is a joy to read, as well as a revealing survey of the Persian dimension of the 'Great Game' played out in the Middle East and Asia by the British and Russian empires.

Percy Sykes is in many ways a stereotypical empire figure, down to his luxuriant moustache and Victorian attire, but there are also many aspects of his life which mark him out from those with whom he may have shared qualities, attitudes and characteristics.

Sir Percy (he was knighted a KCIE in 1915) was a career soldier and diplomat who became a legend in Persia where he spent most of the years 1893-1920. He loved Persia and its people, explored and mapped areas of its then unknown vastness, created the South Persia Rifles during the First World War and cultivated close relationships with members of its ruling classes, most notably Farman Farma, the Governor-General of Kerman.

He also found time to marry the redoubtable Evelyn, with whom he had several children to whom he was a doting if distant father. He ended his life back in Blighty, in somewhat reduced circumstances, but active to the end and passionate about Persia till his dying day.

Antony Wynn has created a memorable biography of a man who might otherwise have remained buried in the annals of British imperial history, but without whose passion for and empathy with Persia and its people British history in the Middle East might have been significantly different.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh