

Biographical Sketch

John Charles Edward Bowen (J.C.E. Bowen) was born on October 8, 1909 in the Malabar Hill neighborhood of southern Mumbai, India. His parents were Winifred Mary Hussey and John Cuthbert Grenside Bowen. As a child, J.C.E. Bowen left India to attend the Charterhouse School in Godalming, Surrey, England, and later attended Oriel College, part of the University of Oxford. After graduating from Oriel with a degree in History in 1931, he returned to India.

(Caption for photograph: J.C.E. Bowen. Pictured behind him is the illustration which appeared on the cover of *Poems from the Persian*)

Part of the third generation of his family to serve the British Raj, Bowen began his career in the British Indian Army in 1932, serving in the 6th Duke of Connaught's Own Lancers. Two years later, he was appointed to the Indian Political Department, and by 1938 was a confirmed member of the Indian Political Service. In the same year, he married Deborah Phyllis Waring. Between 1938 and 1947 (so throughout WW II), Bowen was stationed in Iran as His Majesty's Vice Consul; His Majesty's Consul General for Khorasan; Under Secretary to the Resident for Rajputana; and finally as Assistant Consul in Tehran before returning to work on the northwestern border of British India. In 1950, Bowen became the District Commissioner in the Bechuanaland Protectorate (now Botswana). He remained in Africa, serving in several locations until 1963, when he returned to England.

Bowen admits that it was his mother who had instilled in him an appreciation for Persian poetry at a young age. This is likely a reference to the hugely influential translation of *The Rubaiyat by Omar Khayyam* by Edward FitzGerald which grew in fame from the 1860s onward. FitzGerald arranged the quatrains as a sequential series, paraphrasing some and combining others to create a narrative of the course of a day. The final product is a rich tapestry of Sufism, Epicurean philosophy, hedonism, and poignant moments that has long colored the West's view of both Persian poetry and the "Orient" itself. It is not an exaggeration to state that this work was the most celebrated poetry of the late 19th century. Archaeological discoveries and the decipherment of near eastern scripts in the late 19th century, along with the publication of Sir Richard Francis Burton's 1885 unexpurgated translation of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* (known

popularly *The Arabian Nights*) also fueled this fascination with the “Orient” for generations.

While serving as an officer in Iran, Bowen fell in love with the Persian language, and in 1943 began himself translating Persian into English. His first published translation was exhibited as a part of a propaganda campaign detailing the siege of Stalingrad. After India achieved independence in 1947, Bowen devoted two years entirely to researching and translating Persian and Mogul Indian poetry. By 1948, he published his first compilation of translations, titled *Poems from the Persian* which would go through multiple editions. Despite returning to Foreign Office work in 1950, Bowen continued to regularly publish books of translations for the next several decades. These include *The Golden Pomegranate, A New Selection from the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, Oriental Proverbs: Selected, Interpreted, and Rendered into English Verse, and Plain Tales of the Afghan Border*. In addition to translations, Bowen also authored his own verse. These titles include *Portrait of an Island, Rainbow over Elysium* (both unpublished), and *Poems* (published in 1968).

(Caption for photograph: J.C.E. Bowen’s identity card, issued in Iran, 1940)



Perhaps Bowen’s most significant contribution to the Western study of Persian poetry came when he was one of the first readers to call into question the validity and authenticity of Robert Graves’ and Omar Ali Shah’s translation of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (1968). While credit for first exposing the hoax is attributed to scholar Laurence Paul Elwell-Sutton, Bowen also questioned the validity of the translation very soon after its publication. Bowen published an article titled, "The Rubāiyyāt of Omar Khayyam: A Critical Assessment of Robert Graves' and Omar Ali Shah's Translation," and also authored the book, *Translation or Travesty? An Inquiry into Robert Graves’s Version of some Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, in response to what he believed to be a poor translation based on an inauthentic version of *The Rubaiyat*. British experts in Persian literature have nearly unanimously confirmed Bowen’s evaluation of Graves’

and Shah's work. Bowen continued to work on translations and poetry until his death in Hampshire, England in 1989.

Oberlin College Special Collections purchased Bowen's records from two different sources in 2004 and 2005. The archive was added to support the teaching of Comparative Literature in translation.

Oberlin College Library Special Collections

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