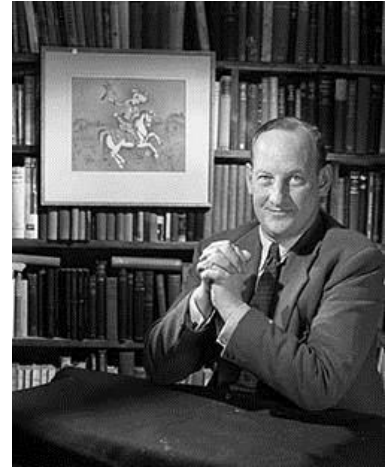


# John Charles Edward Bowen Author Archive

## 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 6<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> century. Archaeological discoveries and the decipherment of near eastern scripts in the late 19<sup>th</sup> 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 Rubā' iyyāt 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.

## **Scope and Content**

This collection contains the papers of the British translator and Indian Political Service member John Charles Edward Bowen. The arrangement of the collection reflects Bowen's organization of his records. The first seven series correspond to seven works written by Bowen. Series eight and nine more broadly encompass the records of both his life and work.

As part of the archive, Bowen's personal copies of his books are also available for use in Special Collections, including copies of *Poems* and *The Golden Pomegranate* custom bound by the celebrated bookbinding firm Sangorski & Sutcliffe, the same firm responsible for the famous "Peacock" binding of *The Rubaiyat by Omar Khyyam* that was lost on the Titanic. Many of the books contain handwritten notes and corrections by Bowen, and provide additional insight into Bowen's work as a poet and translator.

## **SERIES DESCRIPTIONS**

### **Series I. *Portrait of an Island*, 1944-66 and undated**

This series contains manuscripts and typescripts of Bowen's book of poems, *Portrait of an Island*. It is not known whether this collection of poems was ever published.

### **Series II. *Poems from the Persian*, circa 1940s**

These materials include notes, clippings, and correspondence related to Bowen's book, *Poems from the Persian*. Also included is a typescript copy created in 1943.

**Series III. *The Golden Pomegranate*, circa 1940-80 and undated**

This series include clippings, drawings by Bowen's illustrator Phyllis E. MacKenzie, correspondence, posters, and promotional materials related to *The Golden Pomegranate*.

**Series IV. *A New Selection from the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, circa 1960s-1970s**

Series IV contains mechanicals, clippings, endnotes, illustrations, proofs, and publicity materials for *A New Selection from the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. Also included are copper printing plates used for cover illustrations.

**Series V. *Oriental Proverbs*, 1980**

This correspondence pertains to *Oriental Proverbs: Selected, Interpreted, and Rendered into English Verse*. In addition, there is a sample leather roundel for use in the making of the book.

**Series VI. *Journey to the Heart of Asia*, 1982-1987 and undated**

This series contains notes, manuscript, and typescript copies of the work *Journey to the Heart of Asia*.

**Series VII. *Plain Tales of the Afghan Border*, circa 1979-1980s**

The letters in this series have been divided into personal and editorial correspondence. Included in the personal correspondence are a small hand-drawn map and two photographs. There is also one folder with clippings, reviews, and notes.

**Series VIII. Assorted Literary Materials, circa 1930s-1988 and undated**

**Subseries 1. Manuscripts and Typescripts, 1942-1988 and undated**

This subseries contains manuscripts and typescripts from a variety of works by Bowen, both published and unpublished.

### **Subseries 2. Assorted literary materials, circa 1930s-1988 and undated**

These materials relate to several projects with which Bowen was involved during his career. They include notes, correspondence, sample greeting cards containing Bowen's translations of Persian poetry, dust jackets, prints and drawings, financial records, reviews, and mechanicals.

The title "Black Lord's Mountain," which appears on folder 25, was taken directly from Bowen's folder title. It may refer to a mountain (Kūh-i-Malik Siāh) located at the tripoint of the borders of Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. "Black Lord's Mountain" was most likely a working title for a work that was either never published or appeared under a different name. Within this folder there is also correspondence regarding Robert Graves' translation of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, a translation of the Turkish song "Kâtibim," or in English, "My Secretary," or "My Clerk," and translations of Pashtu proverbs.

## **Series IX. Biographical Materials**

### **Subseries 1. General, 1810-1987**

The majority of this subseries comprises correspondence related to John Bowen and the Bowen family. Also included is a visitors' book from "The Vicarage," in Malabar Hill, Mumbai. The subseries also includes a "Walker's Year by Year" journal from 1935 and 1936, and a typed travel journal describing a trip to Egypt. The origin of the visitors' book and the two journals is not clear, though they most likely originated within the Bowen family.

### **Subseries 2. Bechuanaland Protectorate Records, 1943-1953 and undated**

These records originated during Bowen's time as District Commissioner in the Bechuanaland Protectorate. The records are divided into financial records and records of the Office of the District Commissioner. The financial records contain cleared checks from Barclays Bank and The National Bank of South Africa. Also included are invoices and receipts. Records from the Office of the District Commissioner include meeting minutes, confidential circulars and reports on issues as varied as the death penalty and tsetse fly control.

### **Subseries 3. "Road to Badakhshan," 1969-73 and undated**

"Road to Badakhshan" is the title, given by Bowen, of the folder in which these materials were found. Badakhshan is a region of what is now northeastern Afghanistan and southeastern Tajikistan. The correspondence, notes, and report relate to Bowen's preparations and travels to this particular area of Afghanistan. The correspondence includes communication between Bowen and the Royal Horticultural Society's Garden regarding plant collecting, and several maps that were included in letters. The notes include a travel itinerary, poetry, and sketches.

### **Subseries 4. Visual Materials, circa late 1800s-1988 and undated**

This subseries includes photographs, negatives, and an unfinished watercolor painting. The photographs, most of which are not dated, document the Bowen family from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to late 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### **Subseries 5. Ephemera, 1875-1988 and undated**

These materials include: a menu, wedding anniversary cards, a prospectus, prints, hotel cards, issue of the magazine "Ahang," and a certificate from The National Geographic Society.

## **Related Materials**

Charterhouse Digital Archives. <http://www.charterhouse.org.uk/archives>

## **INVENTORY**

### **BOX 1**

#### **Series I. *Portrait of an Island*, 1944-66 and undated**

Folder 1	Manuscript, 1944
Folder 2	Typescript with alternate title, <i>The Island and Other Poems</i> , 1944
Folder 3	Manuscript, 1948
Folder 4	Manuscript, 1966

Folder 5 Manuscripts, undated  
Folder 6 Typescript, undated

**Series II. *Poems from the Persian*, circa 1940s**

Folders 7-10 Material for *Poems from the Persian*, circa 1940s  
Folder 11 Typescript, circa 1943  
Folder 12 Notes, circa 1945  
Folder 13 Clippings, 1948-49

**Series III. *The Golden Pomegranate*, circa 1940-80 and undated**

Folder 14 Clippings from scrapbook, circa 1940s-60s  
Folders 15-16 Drawings by P.E. MacKenzie, 1965  
Folder 17 Correspondence with publishers, circa 1980  
Oversize Promotional poster and illustrations, undated

**Series IV. *A New Selection from the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, circa 1960s-1970s**

Folders 18-21 Mechanicals, circa 1960  
Folder 22 Proofs and publicity, circa 1960s-70s  
Folder 23 Press clippings, 1961-64  
Folder 24 Description of copper printing plates for book jacket, 1966, 1979  
Folder 25 Copies of endnotes, circa 1989  
Folders 26-27 Illustrations, undated  
Carton Copper printing plates, 1966, 1979

**Series V. *Oriental Proverbs*, 1980**

Folder 28 Correspondence with publishers, sample leather rondel, circa 1980  
Folder 29 Correspondence with publishers, 1980

**Series VI. *Journey to the Heart of Asia*, 1982-1987 and undated**

Folder 30 Notes, 1982  
Folder 31 Manuscript, 1982

**BOX 2**





Oversize      Mechanicals, circa 1940s

## **Series IX. Biographical Materials**

### **Subseries 1. General, 1810-1987**

Folder 33      Correspondence – Bowen family, circa 1900s  
Folder 34      Correspondence – Deborah Bowen's trip to Persia, 1943  
Folder 35      Correspondence – J.C.E. Bowen outgoing, 1986  
Folder 36      Correspondence – Afghan Refugee Information Network, 1986-87  
Folder 37      Genealogical records, 1810-1929, undated  
Folder 38      Visitors' book, "The Vicarage," Malabar Hill, Mumbai, 1907-49  
Folder 39      Journal, "Walker's Year by Year," 1935-36

### **BOX 3**

Folder 1      Travel Journal from trip to Egypt, undated  
Folder 2      Clippings, circa 1930s  
Oversize      Persian language clippings, 1931, 1945

### **Subseries 2. Bechuanaland Protectorate Records, 1943-1953 and undated**

Folder 3      Financial records, 1952-53  
Folders 4-7    Records of the Office of District Commissioner, 1943-53  
and  
undated

### **Subseries 3. "Road to Badakhshan," 1969-73 and undated**

Folder 8      Correspondence, 1969-73  
Folder 9      Notes and clippings, 1969-72  
Folder 10     Report, "Mounted Reconnaissance Badakhshan," undated  
Folder 11     Pressed flowers, 1969

### **Subseries 4. Visual materials, circa late 1800s-1988 and undated**

Folder 12     Photographs, 1875-95  
Folder 13     Photographs, circa late 1800s

Folder 14	Photographs, 1903-42
Folders 15-17	Photographs, circa 1910-30
Folders 18-24	Photographs, undated
Folder 25	Photographs of J.C.E. Bowen, circa 1905-1965
Folder 26	Identity card, 1940
Folder 27	Photographs of paintings, 1988 and undated
Folder 28	Photograph folders, 1931
Folder 29	Negatives, circa 1908-1930 and undated
Oversize	Photographs, 1935 and undated
Oversize	Photographs, undated
Oversize	Unfinished watercolor painting, undated

### **Subseries 5. Ephemera, 1875-1988 and undated**

Folder 30	General, 1875-1952 and undated
Folder 31	Wedding date cards, 1891
Folder 32	Prospectus, circa 1988
Shelf	“Smythe” family wooden steamer trunk with steel reinforcing, previously used to store Bowen’s archives, undated

## **Works by John Charles Edward Bowen**

### **Translations (listed chronologically)**

*Poems from the Persian*. Oxford, England: B. Blackwell, 1948.

*The Golden Pomegranate: A Selection from the Poetry of the Mogul Empire in India*.  
Bombay, India: Thacker & Co. Ltd., 1957.

*A New Selection of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. London: Unicorn Press, 1961.

*Shaikh Sa’dī of Shiraz : a brief biography of the poet, with verse translations*. Shiraz,  
Iran : Printed at the Musari Printing Press, circa 1969.

*Oriental Proverbs: Selected, interpreted, and rendered into English Verse*. London:  
Luzac and Co., 1980.

*Plain Tales of the Afghan Border*. London: Springwood Books, 1982.

### **Original Works (listed chronologically)**

*Grim and Gay* (under pseudonym Lancer), 1941. [\[8\]](#)

*Poems*. London: J. Baker, 1968.

*A Journey to the Heart of Asia*. Abingdon, England: Abbey Press, 1972.

*Translation or Travesty? An Enquiry into Robert Grave's Version of Some Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. Abingdon, England: Abbey Press, 1973.

**Broadsides**

*A Calendar of Love*, 1983.

*Rhodes and Asia Minor Remembered*, 1983.

[Search OBIS for works by J.C.E. Bowen](#)

Processed by Haley Antell, Meaghan Brown, and Ed Vermue in August 2015