

Obituary: Nora Elizabeth Mary Boyce

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Professor Nora Elizabeth Mary Boyce, who died on 4 April 2006, aged 85, was a leading authority on Zoroastrianism, the pre-Islamic religion of Iran. Born on 2 August 1920 in Darjeeling, India, she was educated in England first at Wimbledon High School and Cheltenham Ladies's College, and then went up to Newnham College, Cambridge. There she read English for Part I of the Tripos before switching to Archaeology and Anthropology for Part II. She graduated with a double first in 1943. During the Second World War, while carrying out war work in villages near the city, she started to learn Persian with Professor V. Minorsky of SOAS (which had been evacuated from London to Cambridge during the hostilities). In 1944 she was appointed Assistant Lecturer in Anglo-Saxon Literature and Archaeology at Royal Holloway College in London. While holding this post she continued her studies of not only New but also Old and Middle Persian as well as other ancient Iranian languages with the Iranologist Walter Bruno Henning at SOAS. In 1946 she returned to Cambridge to read for a doctorate on "The Manichaean hymn-cycles in Parthian" under Henning's supervision. SOAS appointed her Lecturer in Iranian studies in 1947, Reader in 1958 and Professor in 1963.

Her undergraduate studies with Hector Munro Chadwick, a world authority on oral literature to whose memory she later dedicated her *Zoroastrians, Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, instilled in her a keen and abiding interest in oral cultures, and it was that interest which led her to take the momentous decision to study the religious beliefs and practices of living Zoroastrians in Iran. While the religion of the Parsis in Bombay and Gujarat had been described previously in a number of publications, virtually nothing, apart from some fleeting travellers' accounts, was known about their Iranian counterparts. Shortly after her appointment as Professor of Iranian studies at SOAS in 1963, Mary Boyce travelled overland to Iran and spent a year with Zoroastrian families in Kerman, Yazd and, especially, the village of Sharifabad. As a woman she could live as one of the family without any social complications and take part in all their domestic and social observances. She was the first Western scholar to experience Zoroastrian religious life as an "insider", and this experience proved formative for her interpretation of the religion and its history. In 1972 she received the Burton Memorial Medal of the Royal Asiatic Society for her fieldwork in Iran and presented her findings at Oxford in her Ratanbai Katrak Lectures, delivered in 1975 and published two years later as *A Persian Stronghold of Zoroastrianism*. She was awarded the Sir Percy Sykes Memorial Medal of the Royal Society of Asian Affairs in 1985 and elected an Honorary Fellow of the Ancient India and Iran Trust, Cambridge, in 2004.

Mary Boyce's stay in Iran marks a watershed in her academic writing. Prior to that trip her work was based entirely on the study of texts, and mainly concerned with Manichaean scriptures and Middle Persian and

Parthian philology, although her interest in oral literature also led her to publish on the Iranian minstrel tradition. She excelled in the field of Middle Iranian philology, the domain of her teacher W. B. Henning. Her edition of the *Manichaean Hymn Cycles in Parthian* (1954) as well as her *Catalogue of the Iranian Manuscripts in Manichaean Script in the German Turfan Collection* (1960) are standard reference works. Her articles on “Some Middle Persian and Parthian constructions with governed pronouns” and “The use of relative particles in Western Middle Iranian”, both published in 1964, constitute important contributions to Middle Iranian grammar and are of value to the present day. The first identifies the way pronominal suffixes combine with certain prepositions, while the second offers a detailed analysis of the Parthian (*čē, kē*) and Middle Persian (*ī*) facultative relative particles that connect nominal phrases to one another. Boyce argued that, at a time when inflectional endings were being lost, the particle started as a grammatical convenience to disambiguate the syntactic relationship between such phrases. However, it gradually developed into a grammatical necessity, and the conclusion of this development can be seen in the New Persian *Idāfat* construction. None the less, with the exception of an article on “The Manichaean literature in Middle Iranian” (1968) and her *Reader* (1975) and *Word-List* (1977) of Manichaean Middle Persian and Parthian, from 1966 onwards all her work is concerned with Zoroastrianism.

The encounter with Iranian Zoroastrians led Mary Boyce to conclude that Zoroastrian beliefs are embodied in their religious practices and that both continue traditions that have been handed down virtually unchanged for more than three millennia. The Zoroastrians of Iran lend themselves more readily to such an interpretation than those who migrated to India in the centuries after the Muslim conquest, because the so-called Parsis of Bombay and Gujarat had assimilated some observances from their Indian environment. For the ten-day Iranian spring festival of Frawardigan, for instance, when the spirits of departed ancestors are believed to visit the homes of their families, the Parsis not only adopted the Sanskrit name Muktaḍ but also extended the holiday season to eighteen days. Boyce argued that it was Zarathustra, the religion’s founder, who had instituted the original form of this and many other rites still observed by Zoroastrians in traditional Iranian centres such as Sharifabad.

The main thrust of Mary Boyce’s work is that she viewed Zoroastrianism as a conservative religion characterized by the continuity of its central beliefs and practices. Emphasizing the pivotal role of the prophet Zarathustra as the instigator of the tradition, she argued that he gave to his followers both new teaching and new rituals. She warmly welcomed Johanna Narten’s conclusion that, in addition to the Gathas, the Yasna Haptaḅhāiti could likewise be Zarathustra’s work and thus constitute an example of a ritual instituted by him. Because the beliefs are embodied in rites and ritual they can be seen, learned and experienced by Zarathustra’s adherents. Thus, since rites and rituals are the visible expression of the prophet’s teachings, Boyce argued from an anthropological point of view

that they have been preserved by his followers largely unchanged from one generation to another down to the present day.

Although Iranian Zoroastrians, in contrast to the Parsis, produced no notable Avestan or Pahlavi scholars until more recent times, Boyce maintained that they have made a great contribution to the preservation of Zoroastrian tradition by adhering to old observances, some of which did not cross the sea to India.¹ According to Boyce, they did so so effectively that there is little difference between contemporary Zoroastrianism and that of the Sasanian period. The creed, ceremonies and observances have been maintained essentially unaltered.² While, during the lengthy period following the Arab conquest in the seventh century, most Iranian Zoroastrians yielded to the pressures exerted on them from preaching, persecution and social and political forces, those who did not succumb, Boyce argued, are the most devoted adherents of the faith because they held out against Islam and resisted conversion at the expense of wealth, career and personal security.

On this basis Boyce justified the use of both contemporary religious practice and texts written in Old and Middle Iranian languages as sources of equal importance for reconstructing the whole system of the religion. She tried to understand Zarathustra's teachings with the help of the living tradition and emphasized the continuity of Zoroastrianism from its beginnings to the present. In addition to being the first Western scholar to live with Iranian Zoroastrians, she was also the first to attempt to write a unified history of their religion from its prehistoric origins to the present day, filling in long spans of time, such as the 500-year Parthian period or the initial 1,000 years after the coming of Islam which had been omitted from earlier treatments. Fruits of this approach include her *Zoroastrians, Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, which is a to-date unrivalled introduction to Zoroastrianism first published in 1979 and since reprinted five times and, furthermore, *Zoroastrianism. Its Antiquity and Constant Vigour* (1992), a synthesis of her work based on a series of five lectures delivered at Columbia University at the invitation of Professor Ehsan Yarshater, to whose *Encyclopaedia Iranica* she contributed numerous articles. This historical approach also underpins her *magnum opus*, the monumental *History of Zoroastrianism*, of which three volumes have appeared (1975, 1982, 1991). Until her last days she was working, together with Frantz Grenet, on the fourth volume covering the Parthian period, and had almost finished it. The manuscript will be completed and published by Albert de Jong of Leiden University, since in the late 1990s Mary Boyce had invited him to write the remaining volumes of the *History*.

Mary Boyce's work occupies a position between two other interpretations, both of which share the view that the history of Zoroastrianism consists of several, almost disjunct, phases. According to the first, Zarathustra was a reformer expounding a religion consisting of a rational and ethical monotheism opposed to ritual. Later generations, however,

1 Boyce, 1971, 236.

2 Boyce 1971, 212.

were unable to comprehend and maintain the high and abstract standards of Zarathustra's teachings and re-introduced many pre-Zoroastrian beliefs and practices, such as polytheistic concepts and the Haoma ritual, and thus distorted the reformer's pure religion. Such an interpretation was first put forward in the 1860s by Martin Haug, who argued that the Gathas alone are Zarathustra's work. Haug's ideas were influential both on the Parsi community in Bombay and on Western scholarship, where their repercussions can still be seen in Zaehner's work and Ilya Gershevitch's proposal to give different names to the various historical phases of Zoroastrianism.³

The other position views early Zoroastrianism as a traditional polytheistic religion similar to that of Vedic India and emphasizes the ritual connections within the Gathas. The break in the tradition is placed between the Avestan and Pahlavi texts. With this approach there is a tendency to minimize the importance of the figure of Zarathustra as a religious reformer; he is seen not as a historical person but as the product of mythological speculation. Thus, the young James Darmesteter suggested that the Zarathustra legend pre-dates the Gathas, and in this he was later followed by Marijan Molé, and more recently by Jean Kellens, Eric Pirart and Prods Oktor Skjærvø.⁴

Mary Boyce shared with the second interpretation its emphasis on the importance of ritual in the Gathas and of the Indo-Iranian background in which the religion is rooted, but parted company with it in strongly advocating the reality of Zarathustra as a historical priest and prophet. While in the decades of the mid-twentieth century a sixth-century date for Zarathustra was accepted by distinguished scholars such as Antoine Meillet, Ernst Herzfeld, S. H. Taqizadeh and her own teacher Walter Bruno Henning, Mary Boyce argued for his birth in prehistoric times. According to her, Zarathustra cannot have lived later than about 1200 BC and may have flourished some time earlier, possibly between 1400 and 1200 BC.⁵ Her argument is based on the close linguistic relationship between the Gathas and the Rigveda on the one hand and, on the other, on the world-view which underlies Zarathustra's theology. Moreover, she argued that the imagery used in the Gathas is that of a pastoral society.

In her reconstruction of the society into which Zarathustra was born, Mary Boyce made use of H. M. Chadwick's concept of a "Heroic Age", one that persists throughout all her publications. On the basis of allusions in the Gathas she located Zarathustra in a predatory heroic society that is presented "through the eyes of a relatively weak member of it, a prophet, moreover, passionately devoted to justice and good order and creative works, blessings to be attained with difficulty in a swashbuckling age".⁶ Boyce concluded that Zarathustra is likely to have discouraged any literature celebrating martial exploits for entertainment, i.e. heroic poetry,

3 Gershevitch 1964, 12.

4 Darmesteter, 1882–87, vol. I, pp. lxxvi–lxxix and 1892–93, vol. III, pp. lxxvii f.; Molé 1963, pp. 271 ff.; Skjærvø, 1997. Kellens, 2006, discusses the historiography of the "modèle historique" and "modèle mythologique" of Zarathustra.

5 Boyce, *HZ* I, pp. 3, 190, 348 f.

6 Boyce, 1954b, 46.

but that in later generations the priestly literature absorbed some of the heroic traditions.

Her anthropological background and emphasis on the living tradition tended to prevail over textual evidence, to the extent that occasionally she was prepared to declare an Avestan passage to be spurious if it was in disagreement with conclusions she had drawn on the basis of anthropological considerations. Such an approach sometimes produced views which have failed to convince. For instance, she interpreted the Zoroastrian concept of the Fravashis as originating in the ancestor cult of princely rulers celebrating the valiant warriors of the “Heroic Age”. Since, in her view, Zarathustra was opposed to martial traditions, such a cult could not have formed part of his system. The prophet would have been “mildly opposed on doctrinal grounds to their cult, or at least indifferent to it”.⁷ However, the Fravashis are worshipped in the *Yasna Haptañhāiti*, which she considered to have been composed by Zarathustra. She therefore declared the relevant line to be an interpolation made by priests or “a remarkable teacher” amongst them.⁸ This assumption of an interpolation in an Old Avestan text, however, is problematic for a number of reasons, not least of which is that there is no precedent for such an interpolation.

There are numerous points of detail on which scholars are bound to disagree, especially in view of the meagre evidence available for virtually all periods of the history of Zoroastrianism. The great merit of Boyce’s publications on Zoroastrianism and its history lies in the unified approach she carried through so courageously and effectively, combining textual study with fieldwork and treating the history of the religion from its prehistoric beginnings to the present day. Moreover, all her writing on Zoroastrianism was inspired by a deep sympathy with and respect for the followers of the religion. The life she had experienced with its Iranian believers enabled Mary Boyce to view Zoroastrianism from the point of view of one of its adherents. This intimate acquaintance inspired her to complete the numerous gaps where no sources were available. She was able to put flesh on the all-too-scant knowledge we have of Zoroastrianism, not only through her direct exposure to the living faith but also thanks to her exceptional command of the English language. She took pride in and great care of her literary style. As a result, her writings are both examples of great scholarship and a pleasure to read.

Owing to a back problem, which started in the early 1960s, Mary Boyce took early retirement from the chair of Iranian studies at SOAS in 1982, but continued to be productive until her death. She did much of her writing in her study at home in Highgate, lying on her back on a couch. She lived in the large first-floor flat of an imposing Victorian house. This was reached by a straight, steep flight of steps, which in her final years was fitted with a stair lift. She usually asked visitors to come in the early afternoon for tea, insisting on making it herself but preferring the guest to carry the tray from the kitchen to the study. She used a special cup with a spout so that she

7 Boyce, 1992, 106; 2005, 6.

8 Boyce, 1995, 35, 26.

could drink while reclining. The ensuing discussions would continue for many hours, occasionally until midnight.

Mary Boyce was a warm-hearted but austere lady, and a stern critic. She was known for the trenchancy of her views, which she expressed with a sometimes demoralizing frankness. She was, however, equally critical of herself. Nevertheless, being a good listener, she paid careful attention to what others had to say. She was an excellent and prompt correspondent, and to the end took a keen interest in all things Zoroastrian. She loved flowers, especially the red camellias and the dwarf Japanese cherry in her garden, and every year spent several months in the country, visiting her brother at their ancestral family home in Somerset. She loved the countryside there and was fond of horses, although she probably never rode one. She enjoyed reading Shakespeare's sonnets, as well as detective novels (her favourites were by Reginald Hill and P. D. James), and relaxed looking at children's picture books, such as Christopher Wormell's *Mice, Morals and Monkey Business. Lively Lessons from Aesop's Fables*. However, she considered the competing demands of scholarship and family life to be incompatible and consequently chose to remain unmarried, preferring, as she put it, the fidelity of academia, to which she was totally committed throughout her life.

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