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Road to Afghanistan

A Profile of Professor Michael Barry '70

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He hadn't slept in 28 hours. It was a numbingly cold night in Afghanistan and the Soviet army was not far behind. At two in the morning, Michael Barry '70 and a Swedish aid worker he was traveling with came to a building with a small coal stove and about 200 exhausted mujaheddin fighters sleeping on the dirt floor. Barry put his horses up for the night and tried to go to sleep.

"Are you French?" a fearsome Afghan asked. Barry cautiously replied that he worked for a French aid organization.

"Do you know why Mitterand [the French President at the time] appointed four Communists to his cabinet?" There was no good answer.

They slept until two that afternoon, but when they woke up, the whole valley was eerily deserted. They fed their horses and rode for several hours. At another stop, Barry met the same questioner, who greeted him with "Oh, are you still alive?" Barry had slept through a major Soviet bombing campaign.

Barry, a professor in the Near Eastern Studies Department, left his work in academia in the 1980s to fight the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan.

Today, he's tired for a different reason. He stayed up late putting together course packets for "The Thousand and One Nights," a class that delves into the classic Arabian work.

Before his adventures in Afghanistan, Barry was going through what he called "the standard academic procedure" and graduated from Princeton before attending Cambridge and McGill University, where he later taught Arabic.

As a Ph.D candidate, Barry specialized in Afghanistan because he thought it was the least westernized part of the Islamic world. He also had a close personal connection to the land. He first visited the country at age 15 and learned to speak Afghan Farsi with a native accent. He also understands the two other local languages, Pashto and Urdu, and knows several European languages.

While Barry was doing research for his Ph.D. in Afghanistan, a "humanitarian disaster" struck in the form of the Soviet invasions of the 1980s. In an age without explorers, Barry had to choose between his research about the twelfth century kingdom of Herât and journeying into the lawless wild to expand upon his humanitarian role.

Because of his knowledge of the country and its culture, Barry felt that he "could not turn [his] back on people [he] was in a unique position to help." From early in the conflict, Barry was assisting Afghans abroad to obtain information about their relatives. However, he wanted to do more and eventually threw himself into the fray. Dressed in a turban and sporting a beard, he started riding out with the mujaheddin, some of whom never knew he was foreign.

On one of his journeys, his party met some other mujaheddin riders. One of them reined in his horse alongside Barry and shared the latest rumor.

"Hey, they say there's some foreign guy around here who speaks our language so well you'd think he was one of us," the man said.

"Never heard of him," Barry replied. The American and the Afghan bandit talked for a little while, but when Barry's Afghan companions found out what the two were discussing, they burst into laughter.

The world of "The Arabian Nights" may be a fantasy, but Westerners have sought adventure in the Muslim world for centuries. Like Barry, two great nineteenth century translators of "The Arabian Nights," Edward Lane and Richard Burton, disguised themselves, learned to speak flawless Arabic and tackled adventure after adventure.

Barry documented human rights violations "under the noses of the Soviet army," seeking evidence of cruelties perpetrated by both Soviets and Afghans. He saw the aftermath of burnings, the graves of those who had been buried alive and even crucifixions.

A friend told him that the only way to survive in that environment was to publish everything "so that's it's more embarrassing for [the Soviets] for you to die than to stay alive."

Eventually the strain of daily confrontation with gruesomeness proved too much for Barry. Shaken by the sight of a 15-year-old boy crucified on a tree, he started working as an aid coordinator for Médecins du Monde, a French medical charity. Instead of cataloguing horrors, he trained doctors to survive in the unforgiving terrain. Any candidate who couldn't get over his or her fear of riding a horse was sent home. "Riding a horse is the least of your worries," Barry said.

Barry recalls a moonlit night when he and seven companions had to cross a wide valley lying across their path to the border. Less than a mile up, Soviet artillery pointed right at them. Except for the beating of hooves, it was a completely silent night. The team galloped on. Several hundred yards and what seemed to be an infinity later, everyone had made it safely across and the Soviets began to fire aimlessly into the dark. "It was perfect," he said.

Barry had to keep up his "parallel interest in literature and art to make sure that at least in [his] mind [he] was independent of a humanitarian disaster and could always turn to these pursuits when [it] was over." He is critical of humanitarian workers who become so obsessed with tragedy that their initially charitable motives become selfish.

Barry kept writing and gathering materials for his dissertation. He translated the medieval Persian poet Nezâmî into French. Eventually some of his translations of Persian poetry would be staged at the prestigious Comedie Française in Paris, and the Iranian government awarded him a prize for a translation. He also wrote about his surroundings and the history of Afghanistan. However, he took very few photographs because that would have given away his identity.

As he speaks, Barry enunciates professorially and fluidly switches languages and topics. In the same breath he can discuss aesthetics and the mundane, which comes from his conviction to "refuse to segment the human experience and to consider art to be something frivolous and luxurious."

Today, Professor Barry is an academic once again. He is teaching a popular and unique course on the Arabian Nights, which traces the stories from their origin in ancient India through a dozen different cultures and languages. He is also teaching a graduate seminar on Persian literature and a course on Afghan history from 1747 to the present. He devotes all his free time to writing.

Even though he is thousands of miles away from Afghanistan, he has followed the country's recent development, including the rise and fall of the Taliban and the current reconstruction period.

Barry is hopeful that Afghans will regain their national identity, but is cautiously optimistic because of the political reality:

"The war in Iraq has turned the attention away from building a model democracy in Afghanistan . . . and the country is now rotten to the core with the fact that its peasants mostly rely on the Opium trade in order to survive," he said.

He hopes to assist Afghan universities to recover the national culture and has just finished a book titled "Figurative Art in Medieval Islam and the Riddle of Bihzâd of Herât (1465-1535)," whose analysis of painting in what is now Afghanistan, "the Florence of Islamic civilization," shatters the Western understanding of Islamic art.

In the book, he argues for the first time that apparently secular court painting had a religious significance and approval by religious authorities. The book is currently available in the U-store and will be released in the rest of the United States in May.

His next projects include a biography of the Afghan Northern Alliance general Masood, who he knew well, a book about the little-known but decisive Battle of Diu and translations of his French works. "Everything I do has to be written in both French and English from now on," he grouses.

Barry says that he misses riding his horse over the crest of a hill and seeing nothing but a single plume of smoke rising from a campfire in a barren valley. Fortunately, the purity of academia is a good replacement for what he calls "communion with the basic human condition."