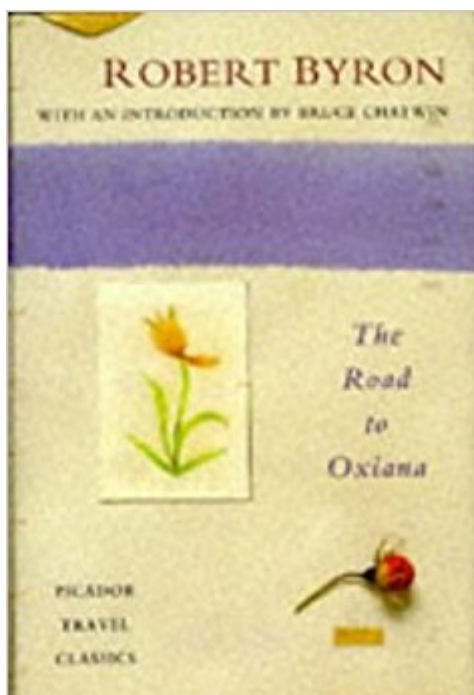


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# The Road To Oxiana (Picador Books)



## Synopsis

This travel book was written in 1933-4 when the author travelled to Persia and Afghanistan. It is a record of his journeys, full of observation of people and places, and funny dialogue. The author, Robert Byron drowned in 1941 when his ship to West Africa was torpedoed. In his short life he travelled as far as China and Tibet. In 1932, attracted by the photo of a Seljuk tomb-tower on the Turkoman steppe, he set out on a quest for the origins of Islamic architecture through Persia and Afghanistan. This book is the result, a record of his journeys. In this new edition Byron's photographs, which have been omitted from all editions since 1950, are restored.

## Book Information

Series: Picador Books

Hardcover: 416 pages

Publisher: Picador (July 8, 1994)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0330334670

ISBN-13: 978-0330334679

Product Dimensions: 4.8 x 1.5 x 7.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 57 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,947,446 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #96 in [Books > Travel > Asia > Afghanistan](#) #1825 in [Books > Travel > Asia > General](#) #5293 in [Books > Reference > Writing, Research & Publishing Guides > Writing > Travel](#)

## Customer Reviews

Extraordinary story by man with deep knowledge of and appreciation for architectural history.....but you don't need to share that interest to enjoy the literate description of a world long since evaporated, of travelers who actually carried "letters of introduction".....in part absurd, in part wildly entertaining.....the ride, by car boat rail truck camel foot ...whatever... is worth it for the company.....

This wonderful account by Robert Byron of his travels through Persia and Afghanistan is spare when it should be spare: "Lifar came to dinner. Bertie mentioned that all whales have syphilis" (a complete paragraph from page 19) and effusive when it should be effusive: "Here the green resolved, not into ordinary grass, but into wild corn, barley, and oats, which accounted for that vivid fire, as of a life within the green. And among these myriad bearded alleys lived a population of

flowers, buttercup and poppies, pale purple irises and dark purple campanulas, and countless others..." (from a paragraph on page 200). Never mind the country he was traveling through, I just love his prose. They are never trite, never cliché. It's almost as if when a hackneyed phrase would have done, he sought hard for something bright, fresh, new. But don't never mind the country he explored (stony deserts, mountains, steppes, caves, rivers) or the people he encountered (generous peasants, officious police, frightened guides, accommodative local governors, obstreperous archaeologists, clueless tourists, declamatory larger than life ambassadors whose words are accompanied by appropriate dynamic markings...) - he makes them all fascinating. His dry British wit pervades much of the manuscript. And, oh, how he waxes eloquent on architecture, a subject which in the abstract seems excruciatingly boring to me, but is never so within this book, as he documents the features of mosques and mausoleums and ruined cities. In the 30's when Byron made this trip Iran was Persia and under the autocratic rule of the Shah (AKA Marjoribanks) instead of being strangled by fundamentalist clerics. Afghanistan was a poor underdeveloped country under (what in Afghanistan passes for) the benign rule of its royal family. Now that country has been destroyed by 30 years of internal strife, war with the Soviet Union, Taliban depravity, war with the US, and more internal strife. Whatever the consequences for the peoples of these countries, the time is long gone when an English speaking traveler could make their way from Persepolis to the feet of the Hindu Kush or the Pamirs. How sad. But at least one can read Byron's book. I'd also recommend Dervla Murphy's Full Tilt: Ireland to India with a Bicycle. It's not as cerebral, but just imagine the idea of anyone, let alone (gasp) a woman, bicycling all the way from Eastern Europe, through Azerbaijan, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan into India. That was in 1963. Wow!

This is a true classic. Easy read full of personality and dry English humour. Travelling through Iran and Afghanistan between the world wars, Robert Byron describes places familiar from the news but inaccessible today. And travelling as only an Englishman abroad can do so. Byron's special interest was architecture and his descriptions of the many mosques and cities he visited are superb. But it is his word paintings of the various characters he encountered that enchant, from the Afghan ambassador to Byron's driver and donkeys.

Byron's travelogue through the Near East early in the twentieth century provides the serious scholar with a flawless insight of the region's cultures, art, architecture, religions, commerce, and politics. Byron's book is considered, by those who are tasked with serious and sensitive work in that region, as being a seminal work. His unique education coupled with his extraordinary capability as an

observer has provided for a remarkable view of the Near East in a manner literally unequalled by the majority of Western scholars over the past almost one hundred years. As a person who lived and worked in Iran, I found his book indispensable.

This is so readable it puts modern travelogues to shame. Byron (distantly related to Lord B.) is erudite, funny, episodic, and he is just a great writer. I am recommending this to everyone I can pin down. Wish it were possible to travel in those areas today but it is not. Byron's knowledge of Islamic architecture is astounding. Had to look up 'squinch'. It's keeping me up nights.

This a very special book where text, substitutes photographs and communicates, for us readers, the atmosphere of Old Persia and Afghanistan. The style of the prose is sensational. Lots of fun reading. Not being politically correct the book passes the real idea of how an educated is challenged by different cultures. Byron is a kind of cocktail of Burton, plus Paddy, plus Anna Commena with a very sharp tongue.

This book helps reader to understand the beauty of many historical monuments in Iran, providing a deep aesthetical analysis of Persian architecture that is moving at the same time. However, author definitely lacks being in touch with people of the places he visits, so it's hard to find a single word in this book that will help to know Iranians and their ways of living better.

Some of his personal interactions with certain people and officials are amusing and quaintly anachronistic, but on the whole, it seems like his trip was more bother than it was worth.

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