

# A THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS

By Ken McNaughton

Sir William Hay Macnaghten—second son of Sir Francis Workman Macnaghten, Chief of the Clan Macnaghtan from 1832 to 1843—was instrumental in making available to the West the collection of Middle Eastern stories known as “A Thousand and One Nights.”

Figure 1. Scheherazade went on with her story.

Folklore is common in every culture. Before books, films and television, people used to sit around a fire, chat and pass on tales, real and imaginary, to amuse one another and keep alive history and rules for living. These would include legends, music, oral history, proverbs, jokes, riddles, popular beliefs, fairy tales and customs.

Because folklore is transmitted orally, it is often difficult to trace its origins to a particular author or time. As scholars, researchers and editors scramble to unearth the past, they come up with different interpretations, translations and conclusions. In the West, we are familiar with Aesop’s Fables, which are sometimes attributed to a slave and storyteller who lived in Greece between 620 and 560 BCE. But the fables of Aesop are composed in a literary format that appears in ancient India, ancient Egypt and also in ancient Sumer and Akkan. Whatever their origin, the fables of Aesop are firmly entrenched in twenty-first century culture and language. Many of these tales—such as “The Tortoise and the Hare” and “The Boy Who Cried Wolf”—involve animals, conclude with a moral, and lend themselves to teaching life’s lessons to children. Grimm’s Fairy Tales were collected by the Germans Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, who published the first volume of eighty-six stories in 1812. Among these were Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Sleeping Beauty and Rumpelstiltskin, which are all part of our culture today.

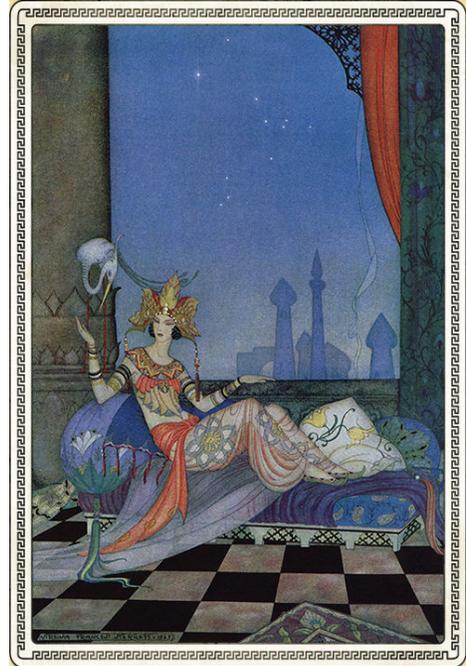
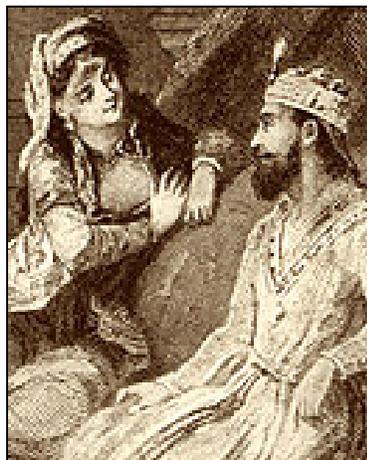


Figure 2. Scheherazade telling her stories to King Shahryar.



The folklore of the Middle East has been less accessible in the West, perhaps due to the rift between Christianity and Islam, different religious beliefs, and unfamiliar customs that may have made some of the Eastern stories hard to translate and difficult to absorb for Western minds. Scheherazade was a legendary Persian storyteller (Fig. 1). The First Persian Empire (558-330 BCE) expanded under Cyrus the Great to stretch from Greece to India and included what we now call Egypt, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. The fortunes of the Persians fluctuated with time and the legacy is now principally in Iran. Thanks in part to Sir William Hay Macnaghten, we in the West are now quite familiar with the story of Scheherazade.

**Figure 3. In this order they proceeded to the palace.**

### COMING TO THE WEST

King Shahryar, agonized by his queen's infidelity, marries a new virgin every day and sends yesterday's wife to be beheaded. The king, running short of brides, questions his vizier, who has two daughters. One of them, Scheherazade, who is learned, wise, witty and well bred, volunteers to spend one night with the king, despite her father's misgivings. Scheherazade arranges to tell her sister a story in front of the king, who is captivated and asks her to finish (Fig. 2). But Scheherazade says there is not time, as dawn is breaking. So the king spares her life for one day. The next night, Scheherazade finishes the story and begins a second, even more exciting tale, which she again stops, halfway through, at dawn. And so the king again spares her life for another day to finish the second story. Thus unfolds a series of nesting stories that keep Scheherazade alive for hundreds of nights, until she tells the king she has no more. By this time the king has fallen in love with her and they have three sons, so the king makes her his queen.



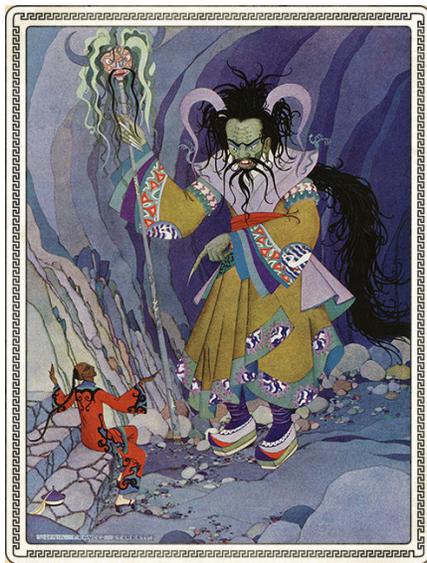
It's difficult to count the exact number of stories. Originally "a thousand" translated to an uncountable number, rather like the modern day equivalent of infinity plus one. Sometimes it's difficult to disentangle one story from another. Later, other stories were added to bring the original number of two to three hundred closer to one thousand and one. Such additions included "Sinbad the Sailor," "Aladdin" and "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves." Of the many versions that came to the West, three or four are mentioned most often—Antoine Galland's 1704-1717 translation into French, the Bulaq Arabic edition of 1835, the Macnaghten Arabic edition of 1839-1842 and Sir Richard Burton's English translation of 1885-1888 [1]. There were many other versions after Macnaghten's, but these will not be considered here.

Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890) was a British explorer, translator, writer, soldier, orientalist, ethnologist, spy, linguist, poet, fencer and diplomat. He spoke 29 languages and made expeditions in search of the source of the Nile. In 1885 Burton published ten volumes with the title "A Plain and Literal Translation of The Arabian Nights' Entertainments, Now Entitled The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night: With Introduction Explanatory Notes on the Manners and Customs of Moslem Men and a Terminal Essay on the History of the Nights." These were based on the Macnaghten edition of 1839-42. Between 1886 and 1888 Burton published a further six volumes, "Supplemental Nights to the Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night with Notes Anthropological and Explanatory," which included stories from other versions, including Galland's. Burton was interested in sexual matters and his edition, which is likely the most well known English version, is more erotic than the other three we will examine here, all of which came before Burton's. David Pinault [2] also concentrates on the remaining three—Galland, Bulaq and Macnaghten.

Antoine Galland (1646-1715) was a French orientalist and archeologist who was given the title Antiquary to King Louis XIV. He acquired a thorough knowledge of the Arabic, Turkish and Persian languages and literature and embarked on a translation of a 14<sup>th</sup>-century Syrian

manuscript of tales from “The Thousand and One Nights.” The first two volumes, “Les Mille et Une Nuits,” were published in 1704. In 1709 he was introduced to a Christian Maronite monk from Aleppo, Hanna Diab, who recounted fourteen more stories from memory. Galland chose to include seven of these in his version of the *Nights*. However, there are no Arabic manuscripts of “Aladdin” and “Ali Baba” that predate Galland’s account. The twelfth and final volume of his work was published posthumously in 1717. Galland adapted his translation to the taste of the time. He cut many of the erotic passages as well as all the poetry. Burton referred to “Galland’s delightful abbreviation and adaptation” which “in no wise represent(s) the eastern original.” But Galland’s translation was greeted with immense enthusiasm and was soon translated into many other European languages.

**Figure 4. Deliver me from this place.**



Bulaq is a two-volume Arabic text dated 1835, which is in the Egyptian manuscript tradition. Ross also refers to two other Arabic texts, the two-volume First Calcutta (1814-18) and the twelve-volume Breslau edition (1825-43). This leaves us only to examine Sir William Hay Macnaghten’s version, sometimes called the Second Calcutta.

#### SIR WILLIAM HAY MACNAGHTEN

William Hay Macnaghten was educated at Charterhouse, went to Madras as a cadet in 1809, and in 1816 joined the Bengal Civil Service. He displayed a talent for languages and published several treatises on Hindu and Islamic law.

William’s political career began in 1830 as secretary to Lord Bentinck, Governor-General of India from 1828 to 1835, and for some years he was in charge of the secret and political departments of the Government Secretariat at Calcutta. In

1837 Macnaghten became one of the most trusted advisers of the subsequent Governor-General, George Eden, Lord Auckland.

Sir William Hay Macnaghten was the editor of four volumes published in Calcutta between 1839 and 1842 by W. Thacker and titled “The Alif Laila, or Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night, Commonly Known as ‘The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments” [3]. The subtitle claimed “Now, for the First Time, Published Complete in the Original Arabic, from an Egyptian Manuscript Brought to India by the Late Major Turner Macan, Editor of the Shah-Nameh.” Since Macnaghten was a trusted adviser of the Governor-General in Calcutta and an Arabic scholar, it is not surprising he would see a manuscript brought to India by Major Turner Macan. Macan was the first European to translate the 60,000-verse Persian historical poem, Shah-Nameh, which was written around 1000 A.D. Macan is listed as living in Carriff, County Armagh, Ireland, in the British Peerage [4] where Sir William Macnaghten is also listed [5].

William’s father, Sir Francis Workman Macnaghten, was the last judge of the Supreme Court of Bengal at Calcutta. After his departure from Calcutta in 1825, he inherited the estate of Mahan in County Armagh from his cousin, Caroline Workman, on condition he assume the name and arms of Workman [6]. Sir Francis also owned property in Limavady, County Londonderry, and in

1832, on the death of his brother, Edmond, he succeeded to Beardville, near Bushmills, County Antrim, and became Chief of the Clan Macnachtan until his own death in 1843.

Sir William Hay Macnaghten and Major Turner Macan must have had lots to talk about when Macan brought the manuscript from Egypt to India. Sir William must have worked hard on it before 1839. The date of publication is 1839-1842, but it is doubtful that Sir William did much work on it after 1839. He had a much bigger project, which prevented him from marketing his literary achievement and capitalizing on its importance [7].

**Figure 5. The Mead Center for American Theater, Washington, D.C.**

In 1838, feeling pressure from the west because the Persians coveted Herat and wanting to take control of Peshawar in India to the east, the ruler of Afghanistan, Dost Mohammed, found himself in the dangerous game of playing the Russians against the British, and seemed to be favoring the Russians. William Macnaghten's favored candidate for the Afghan throne was the exiled Shah Shujah and on October 1<sup>st</sup> his boss, Lord Auckland, made public Britain's intention of forcibly removing Dost Mohammed from the throne and replacing him with Shujah. Macnaghten, who received a knighthood, was appointed envoy to the proposed new royal court at Kabul. Forbes [8] tells us that Durand (perhaps Sir Mortimer Durand, Foreign Secretary to the Indian government, and one of three related Durands in the area at the time), a capable critic, pronounced the selection an unhappy one, "for Macnaghten, long accustomed to irresponsible office, inexperienced in men, and ignorant of the country and people of Afghanistan, was, though an erudite Arabic scholar, neither practiced in the field of Asiatic intrigue nor a man of action. His ambition was, however, great, and the expedition, holding out the promise of distinction and honours, had met with his strenuous advocacy."



Macnaghten, who received a knighthood, was appointed envoy to the proposed new royal court at Kabul. Forbes [8] tells us that Durand (perhaps Sir Mortimer Durand, Foreign Secretary to the Indian government, and one of three related Durands in the area at the time), a capable critic, pronounced the selection an unhappy one, "for Macnaghten, long accustomed to irresponsible office, inexperienced in men, and ignorant of the country and people of Afghanistan, was, though an erudite Arabic scholar, neither practiced in the field of Asiatic intrigue nor a man of action. His ambition was, however, great, and the expedition, holding out the promise of distinction and honours, had met with his strenuous advocacy."

The Army of the Indus, as it was officially called, consisted of 15,000 British and Indian troops, including infantry, cavalry and artillery. It was followed by an even larger force, a rattle-taggle army of 30,000 camp-followers—bearers, grooms, laundry-men, cooks and farriers (to shoe the horses)—together with as many camels carrying ammunition and supplies, not to mention officers' personal belongings. Finally there were several herds of cattle, which were to serve as a mobile larder for the task force. In addition to the British and Indian units there was Shujah's own small army. The invasion force entered Afghanistan through the fifty-mile-long Bolan Pass in the spring of 1839.

On 30 June 1839, opposed only by a line of abandoned cannon, the British appeared before the walls of Kabul (Fig. 3). Dost Mohammed had fled and the city surrendered without a shot being fired. The following day, Shah Shujah entered the city he had not seen for thirty years, with Macnaghten, General Keane and Alexander Burnes riding at his side. The story of the next two years is one of the most extraordinary in the history of the British Empire. It culminated for Sir William Hay Macnaghten on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1841, when he met with Mohammed Akbar Khan,

son of Dost Mohamed, to negotiate an end to conflict. Macnaghten cried “For God’s sake,” and was dragged out of sight down the hill. One of his colleagues, Captain Trevor, was brutally hacked to death in the snow. That night, reports reached the garrison that Macnaghten’s corpse, minus its head, arms and legs, could be seen suspended from a pole in the bazaar, while his bloodstained limbs were being passed around town in triumph. Then followed the bloody winter retreat of the British Army, 16,000 strong, toward the Khyber Pass and India (Fig. 4). One man, Dr. William Brydon, survived to tell the tale, along with a handful of stragglers who turned up from time to time.

In a private communication on 27 January 2011, Jack Ross commented: “Doubt has ... been thrown on how much work Sir William actually did on the book. There’s no doubt he was a fine linguist, but the Afghanistan expedition must have rather impeded his ability to correct proofs. One wonders, in fact, if various “native” scholars in Calcutta didn’t do much of the work, while he supervised from a distance and lent his name to the enterprise.”

**Figure 6. Allen Gilmore played Schehezarade’s father and the Ishak of Mosul at Arena Stage.**



#### THE ARABIAN NIGHTS

Although The Arabian Nights have become a part of our Western culture, I had never seen a performance. And so, on Saturday 22 January 2011, I drove to the Mead Center for American Theater at 1101 Sixth Street SW in Washington, D.C. (Fig. 5). The Arena Stage Company was founded in 1950 and, after a \$125 million renovation from 2008 to 2010, now has the second largest performing arts center in Washington after the Kennedy

Center. In order to block out city noise, the center consists of three theaters snuggled inside a giant shell, with a glass curtain wall facing the Washington Channel of the Potomac River. A large restaurant, The Next Stage, is included, operated by José Andres, who also owns the highly successful Jaleo chain of tapas restaurants.

The Fichhandler has a square central stage with 680 seats ascending on four sides. When we sat down, the stage looked very spare, with only a few lumpy white sheets. I spoke to the lady at my left who, as it turns out, works in the children’s section of the Miller Library that I frequent in Ellicott City. “Looks like they economized on the set,” I commented. But I was jerked to attention when the young men and women of the cast, dressed in loose flowing clothing in natural colors, bounded in from all sides, accompanied by two drummers and a flautist. Lamps descended from the ceiling on long leads, the sheets were pulled aside to reveal low-profile furniture, and Persian rugs were unfurled to cover the entire stage. We were transported to the court of King Shahryar.

The premise was quickly set up and Scheherazade started her first story. The stories unfurled like the carpets, one after another (Fig. 6). Members of the cast transformed from members of Shahryar’s court to whichever characters each story required. Many of the stories in the first act involved men chasing women, women chasing men, copulation and, just before intermission, the longest fart in theatrical history, performed by three actors blowing into the crook of the elbow,

one “relieving” the other as he was spent (“How Abu Hasan Brake Wind”). There were frequent references to Allah and Baghdad, and I wondered if the playwright, Mary Zimmerman, was trying to tell the audience that the people of Bagdad were just like us.

At intermission, as I wandered the spacious passages between the three theaters I ran into my dermatologist, Dr. Frederick Pearson, also of Ellicott City. I commented that the culture was very different from our own, and he rejoined, “Yes, but the bathroom humor is just the same.” In the second half, there was some balance with a story, “Sympathy the Learned,” about a female scholar who comes to challenge the wise men (Fig. 7). She bests them all with a machine-gun string of riddles and tests, but steps away from the final challenge to protect her blind brother. In the story “The Wonderful Bag,” two members of the cast, chosen at random, improvise about what is in the bag, with hilarious results. In another touching tale, “The Mock Kalifah,” the great ruler Harun al-Rashid, disguised as a simple merchant, hides under a bridge and watches a simple merchant disguised as Harun al-Rashid drift down the Tigris on an illuminated boat. Each man longs to be the other. Since 2003, the ancient bridge whose shadow once hid Harun no longer exists, but the story lingers on. The conclusion, when the cast rolled around the floor, looking up at the white nights above Bagdad to a sound track of air-raid sirens, was sobering and thought-provoking.

Figure 7. Sympathy the Learned stuns the wise men.

Mary Zimmerman is a member of the Lookingglass Theatre Company in Chicago and a recipient of a 1998 MacArthur Fellowship. She created “The Arabian Nights,” which premiered at Lookingglass in 1992, from hundreds of Scheherazade’s stories in the shadow of the first Gulf War, inspired partly by a military official boasting on television that we would bomb Iraq “back to the Stone Age.” Sir William Hay Macnaghten did not survive to enjoy the fruits of his scholarship. While his four-volume account of “A Thousand and One Nights” was being published in Calcutta, he was embroiled in a tale more extreme than any that Scheherazade told. His master work lives on, a cornerstone of the literature about The Arabian Nights.



## REFERENCES

1. Ross, Jack, A revision of Kirby and Elsie’s lists of the stories contained in the various editions of *The 1001 Nights*,” <http://dinarzade.blogspot.com/2007/09/concordance.html>
2. Pinault, David, University of Pennsylvania, “Stylistic Features in Selected Tales from “The Thousand and One Nights” (“The Arabian Nights” or “Alf Allah Wa-Laylah”)” <http://repository.upenn.edu/dissertations/AAI8614849/>
3. Macnaghten, W. H., Editor, “The Alif Laila, or Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night, Commonly Known as ‘The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments; Now, for the First Time, Published Complete in the Original Arabic, from an Egyptian Manuscript Brought to India by the Late Major Turner Macan, Editor of the Shah-Nameh,” four volumes, Calcutta, W. Thacker, 1839-42.
4. Major Turner Macan, The Peerage.com <http://www.thepeerage.com/p1543.htm>
5. Sir William Hay Macnaghten, The Peerage.com <http://www.thepeerage.com/p31948.htm#i319479>

6. Macnaghten, Angus I., "The Chiefs of Clan Macnaghtan and Their Descendants," privately printed for the author by Oxley & Son, 1951.
7. McNaughton, Ken, "Sir William Hay Macnaghten and the First Afghan War"  
[http://www.clanmacnaughton.net/docs\\_articles/SIR\\_WILLIAM\\_4rev-2.pdf](http://www.clanmacnaughton.net/docs_articles/SIR_WILLIAM_4rev-2.pdf)
8. Forbes, Archibald, "The Afghan Wars 1839-42 and 1878-80," BiblioBazaar, 2006.

#### NOTES

Figures 1, 3 and 4 are illustrations by Virginia Frances Sterrett (1900-1931) for "Arabian Nights," Penn Publishing Company (1928). Figure 2 is taken from Wikipedia. Figure 5 is by Nic Lehoux, courtesy of Bing Thom Architects, Vancouver. Figures 6 and 7 are by Sean Williams, courtesy of Lookingglass Theatre Company, all rights reserved. This work is copyrighted and may not be reproduced in whole or in part in any medium without written permission from Ken McNaughton, 3778 College Avenue, Ellicott City, MD 21043; phone/fax: 410-418-9340; [kjmcn@comcast.net](mailto:kjmcn@comcast.net) (25 January 2011).