

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on February 2, 2016,
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Richard Nelson
Frye was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

RICHARD NELSON FRYE

BORN: January 10, 1920

DIED: March 27, 2014

Born in Birmingham, Alabama, to Swedish parents, Richard Nelson Frye was raised in Danville, Illinois. As a freshman in high school, on the way to his after-school job as ticket seller in his father's movie theater, twelve-year-old Richard spotted a book in the window of the town's only bookstore: Harold Lamb's *Tamerlane, the Earth Shaker*, which, as he put it, consumed him to the extent that he decided the study of Central Asia would be his life's goal. He went on to study Oriental history at the University of Illinois at Urbana in 1935, serving in the ROTC and studying Arabic language at a summer school at Princeton University in 1938. Upon finishing his undergraduate degree *summa cum laude* in 1939, he began his graduate studies at the Department of History at Harvard, where for two years he studied Chinese language, history, and archeology.

In the fall of 1941, as a naval officer, he was persuaded to learn Japanese but then was called to Washington, D.C., to join the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), manning the "Afghan desk" as part of a team of Near East specialists. After intensive training in cryptanalysis, he was assigned to Afghanistan, where he went carrying with him his Ph.D. thesis, a translation of Narshakhi's *History of Bukhara*. Once in Kabul, he was allotted the teaching of mathematics at Habibiya College (1942–44) since Daniel Ingalls, future Wales Professor of Sanskrit at Harvard, with whom he had traveled, had arrived before him and had preempted all the English classes. Frye traveled extensively in the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia, amassing the intimate knowledge of this region that he would draw upon later in his career.

Frye left the OSS in 1945, returning to Harvard, where he was admitted as a Junior Fellow in the Society of Fellows in the spring of 1946. That fall he received his Ph.D. in the field of Oriental history. His advisor, Robert Blake, then "put him to work" on classical Armenian. Together they also translated the medieval Arabic account of Ibn Fadlan's travels up the Volga, on which Frye's student, the novelist Michael Crichton, based his book *Eaters of the Dead*, which subsequently became the 1999 film *The 13th Warrior*.

When he found he was unable to study Iran and Central Asia intensively at Harvard, Frye began studying old Iranian languages with the great Iranist Walter B. Henning at the University of London, having obtained permission from the Society of Fellows to be away from Cambridge “because of the disruptions caused by the war.” Returning to Cambridge, he taught an anthropological survey of the Near East and continued his studies in classical Armenian, making contacts in the Armenian community, which led to his co-founding of the National Association of Armenian Studies and Research. Thanks to his advocacy, Armenians have established Armenian scholarly studies throughout the United States, beginning with a named chair at Harvard’s Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations.

Frye conducted his first research trip to Iran in 1948. In his third year as a Junior Fellow, he received several job offers, including ones from the Universities of Pennsylvania and of Michigan. With these as leverage, he secured a joint appointment at Harvard as Assistant Professor of Middle Eastern Studies and of General Education.

In 1952 Frye accepted a request from the Metropolitan Museum of Art to catalogue the Persian manuscripts in the collection of Hagop Kevorkian, with whom he became friendly and whom he persuaded to endow a chair in Iranian studies at Columbia University. Frye taught at Columbia for one year but then decided to return to Harvard, where he was promoted to associate professor in 1954. The Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard was founded that year, and Frye managed daily operations there. His students over the following years included the Aga Khan’s grandsons Karim and Amin and their uncle Sadruddin, whom Frye consulted on the possibility of establishing a chair in Iranian studies at Harvard. Sadruddin told him to write to his father, who wrote back, “Where should I send the money?” The Aga Khan chair of Iranian was duly established in 1957 with Frye as the first incumbent, a post he held until 1990.

During his long Harvard career, Frye served as visiting professor or scholar at the Universities of Frankfurt (1959–60), Hamburg (1968–69), Shiraz (1970–76), and Tajikistan (1990–92) and was Director of the Asia Institute in Shiraz from 1970 to 1975.

At Harvard, Frye taught entry-level courses on Iran and Zoroastrianism that served undergraduates and graduate students in fields related to these subjects. Many of his graduate students have continued in academia and made signal contributions to Iranian and Central Asian history.

In 1972, he co-founded the Harvard Committee on Inner Asian and Altaic Studies, which he chaired from 1983 to 1989 and which has produced doctoral students in fields reaching geographically from Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet to modern Eastern Europe.

Among his numerous publications are *The History of Ancient Iran* (1984), a comprehensive history of greater Iran, including Afghanistan and Central Asia, and three other valuable historical surveys: *The Heritage of Persia* (1963), *The Golden Age of Persia* (1975), and *The Heritage of Central Asia* (1996). His fascinating autobiography, *Greater Iran: A 20th-Century Odyssey*, appeared in 2005. Many of his books have been published in several major languages, including Russian and Persian.

From his fifty years at Harvard and forty-one years on its faculty, Frye left his colleagues with an indelible memory of a unique personality. He cared deeply for his students and possessed vast knowledge that he was always ready to share with colleagues here and elsewhere. He was renowned wherever he went for both his good humor and his outspoken opinions.

Richard Nelson Frye died on March 27, 2014. He is survived by two of his three children from his first marriage and a son, Nels Mishael, with his second wife, Eden Naby.

Respectfully submitted,

William A. Graham, Jr.
Carl C. Lamberg-Karlovsky
Roy P. Mottahedeh
Gregory Nagy
Prods Oktor Skjærvø, Chair