War shifted east—towards Iran and then Afghanistan, the tribal ruler occupying the throne in Kabul and seen in the KGB. As the political domain of the Cold War literature, the label for a grand and romantic crime, was unveiled at a time when the Em- peror Victoria purchased the painting for her own collection. But what sealed Butler’s reputation was The Remnants of an Army, which was unveiled in 1878. This was her portrait of Dr William Brydon, purportedly the last survivor of the 1842 British retreat from Kabul in the aftermath of the first Anglo-Afghan War. Against a distant and barren landscape, the painting foregrounded a hunched figure atop a tired, almost dying, horse, while a rescue party was seen charging from a fort. The painting was unveiled at a time when the Empire was engaged in the second Anglo-Afghan War and the mood was rather boisterous.

Butler framed the war through both text and image—the title ‘Remnants of an Army’ endowed a sense of tragedy to the lone figure, and the landscape against which he was pictured was an unforgiving, endless one. Butler’s decision to portray Brydon as the only surviving member of an imperial army seems to have been a conscious one, and deserves our attention. Appearing at a time when the second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-80) was in full swing, Butler’s painting sounded a cautionary note on the imperial project in Afghanistan.

It was well known by 1878, though legends abounded to the contrary, that Dr Brydon was not the sole survivor of the 1842 retreat. Many hundreds of the nearly 17,000 troops and civilians who evacuated Kabul—only 700 or so were British nationals—had survived. Hundreds of the indigenous infantry (sepoys) were captured and sold into slavery by Afghan troops. A number of British officers and their retinues were taken as hostages by the warring princeling Akbar Khan, who led the main force against the British. The memoirs of the British survivors and the military testimonies of the sepoys were subsequently published and debated, and were commonly known truths of imperial London. Hence Butler’s decision to project Brydon as a sole survivor was less documentation of fact and more a comment on the high price that this frontier region could extract from the Empire. Butler seemed to want to ensure that the general euphoria about imperial aims in Afghanistan was tempered by a recognition of past setbacks. Her painting of Dr Brydon, who had died in 1873, was not a condemnation of war, but rather a warning, a plea to learn from mistakes.

Butler’s depiction of the first Anglo-Afghan War went on to become the basis of a long-enduring myth on the futility of imperial interven- tion in Afghanistan, an image of the hubris of colonial imagination in the high stepping of Central Asia, providing inspiration for those who wanted to do empire ‘right’. The image, which started out as a warning, transitioned over the years into a convenient hook for all manners of Borodin fantasies of power and imperial rule—adorning book covers and plates in tomes after tomes. The impetus to keep trying to get the proj- ect of Empire right in Afghanistan also comes from another iconic myth generated by impe- rial agents—a myth with just as tangential a relation to history as the one created by Butler’s The Remnants of an Army. This was the ‘Great Game’. There are only incidental references to this phrase in political tracts prior to the mid-19th century, when it could refer to any number of conflicts—American, Ottoman, French—and any number of theatres—India, Europe, America. The term became associated with British-Russian rivalry in the latter half of the 19th century, thanks largely to the historian John W Kaye, who popularised it in his Lives of Indian Officers (1867). It was next invoked by Rudyard Kipling in Kim (1900), in which the idea of the Great Game acquired a cloak-and-dagger quality.

But it was only after the Second World War that ‘Great Game’ explicitly became, in Cold War literature, the label for a grand and roman- tic theatre of covert war. It was then that the popular press cemented a connection between the postwar era and the British-Russian rivalry of an earlier century. The motif grew to include the intrigues between the spies of the CIA and the KGB. As the political domain of the Cold War shifted east—towards Iran and then Af- ghistan—the lessons of the Great Game were constantly invoked and arguments made to play the game according to a gentleman’s code. It was a cruel irony that while the various states were enacting bloody and divisive policies in Afghan- istan, the discourse of the intelligentsia trans- formed the metaphor of a game, with all its impli- cations of rules, procedures and equal partners engaged in daring and fun activities. This meta- phor was used to provide the necessary ring of grandeur to a clearly imperial project resulting in killing fields and the massive dislocation of native populations.

Now, in the near-aftermath of the fourth Anglo-Afghan War, William Dalrymple takes the frame of Last Remnants of an Army and the intrigue of the Great Game and fills in all that Butler had elided and Kipling implied. Dalrymple’s Return of a King: The Battle for Afghanistan (2009-12) is the 3-D, IMAX, 48-frames-per-second Hollywood version—featur- ing Kabul, Jalalabad, Qandahar, Peshawar, Lahore, Ludhiana, London and Moscow. Brydon is joined by a wide cast of characters, native and colonial, elite and subaltern, male and female: there is Shah Shuja (the titular King), whom the British wish to place on the throne in Kabul; Alexander Burnes, the British political agent who knows the land, its languages and its women intimately; Dost Muhammad Khan, the upstart tribal ruler occupying the throne in Kabul and seen...
The Last Mullah

Dalrymple at its most visible public intellectuals. His previous the first Anglo-Afghan war, to the spurious Afghan intervention in Afghanistan, which spurred or provoked into action after an accusation that be sustained by historical evidence. -

The book is an action spectacular with be

The ‘upstart’ tribal ruler of Afghanistan, Dost Muhammad Khan.

to be juggling the Russians; British military men and their wives exemplified by Robert and Plomerita Dalrymple; the young warrior Akbar Khan who is leading the war against the British; his native ally, the Sikhs ruler of Punjab and Peshawar, Raja Ranjit Singh; and the native informant, the munshi Mohan Lal Kashmiri, among others.

Dulrymple, the most famous living British mi-

girl (2010) purloined a similarly attractive mix-
ture of biography and cultural history to make tangle present-day contestations. In his opinion and review pieces in the Indian, US and UK press, his engagement with the war in Iraq and Afghanistan is often critical though prescriptive. He champions the literary and musical talents of South Asia both at home (as co-organiser of the annual Jaipur Literature Festival, for example), and abroad (as a co-curator for museum exhibi-
tions and concerts). He is almost unrecognised in the English-speaking world as a historical and cultural commentator on South Asia. As such, he is able to marshal vast resources for his work from key sectors of the military, the state, and the academy. A small illustration: senior curators and researchers (Iue Stronge of Victoria and Albert Museum, John Falconer of British Library); prominent historians (Saul David, John Keay, Chris Bayly, Ayesha Jalal, Nile Green, BN Goswamy); members of the Indian, British, Af-

in alliance with his counterparts, the Russian officer Ivan Vitkevich, the British military camp in Afghanistan, 1879.

The ten chapters of Return roughly cover the period from the first decade of the 19th century to 1842. In the opening chapters, Dalrymple fo-
cuses on the person of Shah Shuja, the claimant to the throne of Afghanistan, his succession, and the machinations between the East India Com-
pany and the Sikhs in the early decades of the 19th century. The Company de-
feated the Marathas as well as captured Delhi in 1801-3 and immediately looked to the north-west, where Ranjit Singh’s Punjab empire had emerged in 1801. The Great Game is the dramat-
ic framework within which Dalrymple places this history and his characters—chief among them is Alexander Burnes, the British political agent who emerges as the other protagonist of the book. Burnes is the learned man of letters and his new allies. Shah Shuja is slain. This is tre-

Amidst this conflict, a treaty with Afghanistan emerged in 1801. The Great Game is the dramat-
ic framework within which Dalrymple places this history and his characters—chief among them is Alexander Burnes, the British political agent who emerges as the other protagonist of the book. Burnes is the learned man of letters and his new allies. Shah Shuja is slain. This is tre-
An American soldier asks an Afghan elder, *why do you hate us?* Obliquely, Dalrymple offers *Return of a King* as an answer to that question. It just happens to be the wrong question to ask in 2012. //

Retributive army. In both chapters, Dalrymple expertly switches between colonial and local accounts, keeping the perspective on the participants by reproducing large chunks of their testimony in the account and letting the texture of these witness accounts speak for itself.

Despite his successful presenting a nuanced account of the fallout of the 19th century imperial mission in Afghanistan, Dalrymple's framework—a framework that tax 2012 to 1842—requires him to ignore a huge range of historical events that are much more relevant than the Great Game in understanding the Anglo-Afghan conflict. For instance, in 1830 Shah Ismail and Syed Ahmed, two icons of the religious elite in Delhi who set out to establish a new kingdom of Allah in the north and who mobilised many Pathan tribes, declared a jihad against the Sikh kingdom, the first time this was used as a political tool. This is an important ideological link to the history Dalrymple is presenting, necessary in understanding how Dost Mohammad and Abkar Khan, too, invoked jihad as a military tool against Shah Shuja and the British. Jihad as a political strategy in north India continued to play a role in the century that followed. Similarly, Dalrymple leaves out the crucial history of the opium trade. This trade was the impetus for the Company's efforts to control the Indus River channel—which put it in direct conflict with two princely states: Punjab and Sind. In Punjab, Ranjit Singh held Lahore since 1799 and had designs on the northwest and the south, and the British kept a very wary eye on him. Dalrymple does a great job of portraying the personality of Ranjit Singh and his role in the early stages of the Anglo-Afghan conflict (he dies in 1839) but does not link him to the Company's economic policies. Similarly, the mouth of the Indus river into the Arabian Gulf, through which opium was shipped, was governed by the Emirs of Sindh, whom the Company went on to depose in 1843. The Company, more than a playboy of geo-politics, was a public stock company with an eye on the crucial bottom line. Overall in the book, Dalrymple does not differentiate between British Royal/Parliamentarian politics and Company politics.

Further, Dalrymple stops his story in 1842, but his linking of 1842 to 2012 excludes the post-1857 Raj from his frame. The turbulence of 1857 (which Dalrymple has covered in previous books but does not discuss here) merits inclusion precisely because it gives birth to the colonial practices of ethnography as a basis for governing the tribes of the Northwest frontier. The British, recognising that honour was a necessary and strategic aspect of Pathan life, commissioned ethnographies of Paktumwalli (the Pathan way of life) to prove it, thus advancing a seemingly scientific basis for the categories of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ tribal leaders.

The list could go on, but the substantial point is simply this: given the complex history of the region, there is no simple equation possible between those who hold power in present day Afghanistan and those who were attempting to control it in 1842. If the aim of Dalrymple’s book is to explicate a slice of Afghanistan’s 19th century past on its own terms, then this criticism is invalid. However, as his epilogue to the last chapter makes clear, he is pointedly linking this slice of history to Afghanistan’s immediate past and current quandary.

The decade-long effort in Afghanistan to create a civil body, under a figurehead, Hamid Karzai, is nearing its end. Since 2008, we have seen surges, displacements, assassinations via drones, security-clearance murders, bombs, and a renewed Taliban presence across the Pashtun region. To read Dalrymple’s *Return of a King* in this supremely dispiriting world is to surrender willingly to a narrative out of sync with the multiple histories at play in the region. There is no romance in Afghanistan (as Dalrymple notes repeatedly concerning the dangers he faces while doing research there) and his tendency to endorse the figures of Shah Shuja and Alexander Burnes with romance is jarring and troubling. Dalrymple’s focus on this particular segment of history, and his placing it within the framework of the Great Game, also ends up eclipsing the arguably more pertinent histories of the Cold War and Russian and Pakistani invasions into Afghanistan. Taking into account this immediate history of violence, however, would only have been possible were Dalrymple engaged in a more thoroughgoing critique of empire and not one that is at the service of bettering Western-driven governance in Afghanistan and the pacification of Afghan tribes.

Dalrymple ends his book with another familiar image: an American soldier asks an Afghan elder, *why do you hate us?* Obliquely, Dalrymple offers *Return of a King* as an answer to that question. It just happens to be the wrong question to ask in 2012.