



## BOOKS

## HOW TO DO EMPIRE RIGHT?

MANAN AHMED ASIF

A LAYERED, YET SELECTIVE HISTORY OF THE WEST IN AFGHANISTAN



**Return of a King:  
The Battle for Afghanistan**  
WILLIAM DALRYMPLE  
BLOOMSBURY, 608 PAGES, ₹799

**E**LIZABETH THOMPSON BUTLER was one of the most celebrated painters of military life and scenes in the late 19th century imperial Britain. She first garnered wide fame for her painting *Roll Call* (1874), about the aftermath of the chaotic Crimean War. It depicts a sad and disheveled group of soldiers awaiting the morning roll call. It was a starkly un-romantic view of the troops, which sparked a wide-ranging debate on British military practices. Its significance as a cultural artifact was confirmed when Queen Victoria purchased the painting for her own collection. But what sealed Butler's reputation was *The Remnants of an Army*, which was unveiled in 1879. 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 deci-

sion 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 retainers 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 some of 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 intervention in Afghanistan, an image of the hubris of colonial imagination in the high steppes of Central Asia, providing inspiration for those who wanted to do empire ‘right’. The image, which started



Elizabeth Thompson Butler's *Remnants of an Army* depicted the rout of the British in 1842, following the first Anglo-Afghan war.

out as a warning, transitioned over the years into a convenient hook for all manners of florid fantasies of power and imperial rule—adorning book covers and plates in tome after tome.

The impetus to keep trying to get the project of Empire right in Afghanistan also comes from another iconic myth generated by imperial sources—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* (1901), 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 romantic 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-

ghanistan—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 Afghanistan, the discourse of the intelligentsia trumpeted the metaphor of a game, with all its implications of rules, procedures and equal partners engaged in daring and fun activities. This metaphor 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.

**N**OW, 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 (1839-42)* is the 3-D, IMAX, 48-frames-per-second Hollywood version—featuring 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



A British military camp in Afghanistan, 1879.

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

The story is straightforward. Shah Shuja has lost his throne in Kabul and is in exile in Punjab. The British suspect that the current occupant, Dost Muhammad, may align himself with the Russians and provide a base for them to attack India. Hence, the British launch a campaign to help Shah Shuja win back Kabul. They manage this successfully and install the King, but very soon after, Akbar Khan, Dost Muhammad's son, retaliates and takes back Kabul, expels or captures the British (the rout seen in Butler's painting of Brydon); Shah Shuja is killed in the aftermath. The British launch a second expedition to avenge the defeat and in doing so decimate a large part of the Afghan population and vast tracts of the city.

The book is an action spectacular with beheadings, boilings, de-boning and skewering aplenty. The characters are larger than life—often written as prophetic and tragic voices of doom. The current war in Afghanistan looms over each page and in footnotes, where Dalrymple ties a geographic or genealogical thread between the text and the subtext. In keeping with the spirit of Butler's painting, this is still an effort to do empire 'right': "It is still not too late to learn some lessons from the mistakes of the British in 1842".

Dalrymple, the most famous living British migrant to India, is now firmly established as one of its most visible public intellectuals. His previous books *White Mughals* (2002) and *The Last Mu-*

*ghal* (2006) parlayed a similarly attractive mixture of biography and cultural history to make tangible 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 exhibitions and concerts). He is almost unrivalled 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 (Sue Stronge of Victoria and Albert Museum, John Falconer of British Library); prominent historians (Saul David, John Keay, Chris Bayly, Ayesha Jalal, Nile Green, BN Goswami); members of the Indian, British, Afghan and American state apparatuses (Amrullah Saleh, Chief of Security for President Karzai; Ashraf Ghani, ex-Finance Minister of Afghanistan; Sir Sherard Cowper Coles, British Foreign Secretary; Rory Stewart, British Member of Parliament; Brigadier General Simon Levey, British Commander; Jayant Prasad, former Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan; Charles Allen, formerly a prominent functionary of both the US State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency); and cultural and research institutions (British Council, UNESCO, French Archeological Mission, Aga Khan Foundation, Punjab Archives Lahore, National Archives India) are among those explicitly thanked in the acknowledgments. Add to this the work of Bruce Wannell, Aliyah Naqvi, Tommy Wide and Robert McChesney, who translated all of the Persian or Urdu sources employed by Dalrymple, and you see why I called this a "Halcyon version"—this is truly a grand collaborative effort, linking the highest echelons of academic, military, political and cultural spheres.

In *Return of a King*, Dalrymple seeks to offer a corrective to the imperial mission in Afghanistan while highlighting the work of Afghan historians and accounts in Dari or Persian from the 1840s so as to tell a history of the country in the voices of its own historians. He argues that the first Anglo-Afghan war resonates with the events post October 2001, especially in the figure of Hamid Karzai and the tribal politics of post-Taliban Afghanistan. Dalrymple makes an attempt to connect the claims of imminent Russian intervention in Afghanistan, which spurred the first Anglo-Afghan war, to the spurious evidence regarding the presence of Weapons of Mass Destruction, which launched the Iraq War

in 2002, but this is not a strong argument and he does not make it strongly either. He is more successful in highlighting the hubris in the British (and by corollary American) officials, as well as the short-sightedness of policy in both the 19th century scenario and the 21st century one. Just as the attempt to caution the imperial capital echoes Butler's *Remnants of an Army*, making space for the native voice as a corrective to the current project in Afghanistan recalls the work of Henry Miers Elliot, whose eight volumes of *History of India as told by its own Historians* appeared between 1866 and 1877.

The ten chapters of *Return* roughly cover the period from the first decade of the 19th century to 1842. In the opening chapters, Dalrymple focuses on the person of Shah Shuja, the claimant to the throne of Afghanistan, his succession, and the machinations between the East India Company and the Sikh empire in Punjab in the early decades of the 19th century. The Company defeated the Marathas as well as captured Delhi in 1801-3 and immediately looked to the northwest, where Ranjit Singh's Punjab empire had emerged in 1801. The Great Game is the dramatic 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 lothario who knows much, says little and dies heroically. Through Burnes's own correspondence and the accounts of his associates, Dalrymple creates the figure of the tragic hero who saw the writing on the wall but was unable to change the short-sighted men at the helm.

In these early chapters, Dalrymple's tone is a tad too portentous, always invoking the dark horizon of the future. One can almost hear the crescendo of a Wagnerian score when Burnes meets his counterpart, the Russian officer Ivan Vitkevitch at Dost Mohammad Khan's court in Kabul: "The dinner between the two great rivals—the first such meeting in the history of the Great Game—took place on Christmas Day 1837". Except, as Dalrymple documents, Vitkevitch's efforts at communicating with Kabul amounted to not much more than a passing curiosity for the Russians, who were rather unconcerned with Afghanistan—and Burnes himself did not feel he was in a rivalry with the Russian. The invocation of the Great Game may provide Dalrymple with the necessary tension and forward momentum for a political history but such a reading cannot be sustained by historical evidence.

The second half of *Return of a King* is particularly riveting, and tightly written. Dalrymple attempts, as much as possible, to be generous to the



The 'upstart' tribal ruler of Afghanistan, Dost Muhammad Khan.

sources he is citing—incorporating large chunks of primary text. He describes how the governance of Afghanistan begins to falter under the twinned yet distinct ideals of Shah Shuja and the Company—the various tribal histories and their inimical politics come to the forefront. The Company officials, cracking under the strain of heavy financial burden, begin to take desperate measures and step by step aggravate allies and enemies alike. As distrust grows, Akbar Khan begins to marshal support by declaring jihad on the British and breaking off alliances with Shah Shuja. Eventually, Qandahar and Kabul are both in flames and the British are uprooted violently by Akbar Khan and his new allies. Shah Shuja is slain. This is tremendous writing. Dalrymple manages to keep the multivoiced texts in sync with his own voice, and keeps the narrative time ticking.

To Dalrymple's credit, though he had invoked the Great Game in the earlier chapters, this is not a narrative solely about men engaged in charged, clandestine pursuits, with nary a word about the human cost of their actions. Dalrymple does not hide the violence of the Game, and he does not make it cavalier. His two finest chapters turn on the disparate accounts of violence in various British and Afghan sources about the actions in Qandahar and in Kabul starting in 1841. In the chapter 'All Order is at End', Dalrymple traces the death of Alexander Burnes in November 1841, at the hands of a mob, incensed or provoked into action after an accusation that Burnes had dishonoured an Afghan woman. In 'A War for No Wise Purpose', he documents the ravaging of Afghanistan by General Pollock's

// **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.

**D**ESPITE HIS SUCCESSFULLY presenting a nuanced account of the fallouts of the 19th century imperial mission in Afghanistan, Dalrymple's framework—a framework that ties 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 scions 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 Akbar 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 Sindh. 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 player 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 Paktunwali (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 endow 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 effacing the arguably more pertinent histories of the Cold War and Russian and Pakistani incursions 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. ■