

Books about Afghanistan 3

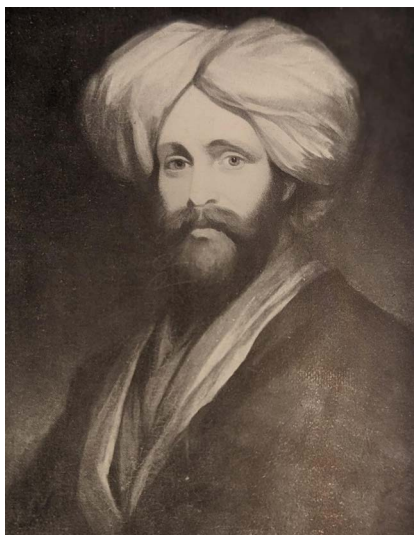
Nicholas Barrington

For the third part of my reflections on my books about the history of Afghanistan and Central Asia in the 19th century we must not neglect Herat, the historic city near the western border of Afghanistan, which both Persian and Russian governments had their eyes on at different times. In the period we have been looking at, it was a small city-state independent of Kabul, ruled by Shah Zaman, prince of an earlier Afghan dynasty, and was under the control of his powerful Wazir, Yar Mohammed Khan. The latter dealt in slaves, and was characterised as a 'shameless ruler but a good politician'.

The man whose name is most associated with Herat is Eldred Pottinger, whose uncle, Sir Henry Pottinger, was a political agent in Sindh (they were also Ulster Protestants). Eldred found himself an independent traveller in the city at a time when the Iranian Shah, encouraged by the Russians, was laying siege to Herat. Yar Mohammed recognised the value of taking advice from an Englishman and the two of them mobilised defences and inspired the population in such a way that the Persians eventually withdrew. Pottinger became an unexpected hero.

After a time he left Herat, unable to persuade Yar Mohammed to clean up his administration, and was recruited to join the British army invading Kabul. As political agent he became involved in dealing with disaffection in the Kohistan area north of Kabul. As one of the senior Kabul prisoners he took the initiative to make unauthorised financial promises to secure their release. He was cleared in a court of enquiry and left to join his uncle who had since 1843 been Britain's first Governor of Hong Kong. Eldred died of typhus there aged 32. Several Pottinger relatives in due course became historians of the events described.

A few bright young British officers were sent to continue to liaise with Yar Mohammed in Herat. James Abbott was sent on an ill-defined mission to meet the Khan of Khiva and discuss ways of deterring Russian invasion. He had several sessions with the Khan, but each distrusted



Major Eldred Pottinger, from The Afghan Connection: The Extraordinary Adventures of Major Eldred Pottinger by George Pottinger, Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1983.

the other and no adequate security was provided for Abbott's following journey westwards, through unknown territory of Turcoman and predatory 'Kuzzauk' tribesmen (presumably Muslim nomads we now call Kazakhs) to meet Russians. Abbott was betrayed by local guides, attacked and captured with his party. He was injured and lucky to survive but eventually met up with Russians at an outpost on the Caspian Sea, through whom he was escorted back to Europe. There were confusing accounts of him being captured by Cossacks, but they were a completely different Christian people, some of whom served in the Russian army.

Abbott's two-volume book, difficult to obtain, *Narrative of a Journey from Herat to Khiva, Moscow, and St Petersburg* (1843), is disorganised and disappointing, full of irrelevant stories and detail. It is difficult to reconcile the author with Abbott's subsequent career. After the British retreat from Kabul he was posted to the area of the Punjab, north of Rawalpindi, called the Hazara (not to be confused with the Shia people in central Afghanistan). He made himself so popular with local people that they have ever since insisted on calling the main town of the area Abbottabad.

While Abbott was missing, his next fellow officer at Herat, Richmond Shakespeare, was given the difficult but better-planned task by Macnaughton of going to Khiva to meet the Khan and then conduct over 500 of his Russian slave prisoners

back to Orenburg in Russia. This was part of a prisoner swap including the Khivans held by the Russians, brokered by the British, to remove the pretext for Russians about to invade Khiva. Before setting out, when Shakespeare asked his companions, a group devoid of other Europeans, whether there was danger of being killed in Turcoman country he was told not to worry: 'They won't kill you; much more likely to sell you.' Having travelled through unknown territory, via Merv, Shakespeare got on well with the Khan of Khiva, successfully insisting on collecting all the Russian prisoner slaves in the area. Having delivered them safely to Russian territory he went on as Russian guest to St Petersburg when he was greeted with acclaim and received public thanks from the Emperor. Returning to London he was knighted by Queen Victoria at the young age of 29. It was a remarkable achievement recorded not in a book, as far as I can discover, but in an extended article in the *Edinburgh Journal* of 1842. Promoted and posted to join General Pollock's forces tasked with returning to Kabul to avenge the British defeat, he was the first officer who greeted the Kabul prisoners, freed at last. They knew they had been greeted by 'Sir Richmond'.

One of the most interesting books about the Herat area is the *Caravan Journeys and Wanderings* of the French former soldier J.P. Ferrier, well translated and finely published in the second edition of 1857 that I have. He also wrote a history of Afghanistan. He saw a great deal of Yar Mohammed, who treated him reasonably well in contrast to the hostility and greed of the leader of Dost Mohammed Khan's Qandahar group of brothers, Kohandil Khan. The latter's son in Farrah also tried to make his life a misery. Ferrier travelled to areas of Afghanistan barely covered by others: the Aimaq, Teimuni, and Jamshidi tribal communities, as well as Hazaras, living in the interior East of Herat. He also visited little-known areas of Baluch Seistan and Helmund in the south west. He couldn't get permission to depart via Kabul. He was critical of British policies, hardly surprising after the errors of the first Anglo-Afghan war, but maintained about the British that 'whatever may be said in Europe their firmly-seated power is less odious than that of the

tyrants they have dispossessed.' Also: 'The superiority of their policy and arms has insured them their colonial dominions.' It is good to get such an outside opinion. In general, the French in the area, such as some of Ranjit Singh's governors, Allard and Court, were invariably friendly and helpful to the British, though they had been our enemies in the recent Napoleonic wars.

Explorers hoping to visit the remaining independent cities and states of Central Asia now increasingly approached from the West. Many, of course, were Russians. But that is a separate area of study. Despite a number of disasters they were generally successful in extending their influence and authority through the great expanses of Siberia. The goodwill towards Britain at the time of Shakespeare and Abbott was being eroded by suspicion and rivalry. By the time that the Russian-speaking Captain Burnaby decided independently to drive through little-known territory to Khiva in 1875, recorded in his book *A Ride to Khiva*, relations with Russians were often tense. Burnaby did reach Khiva, giving the Russians the slip at some point, but was obliged to return the way he had come. His book was mainly about considerable practical travel problems.

A more entertaining story is the remarkable account of an enterprising journalist, Edmund O'Donovan, who set out from Turkey in 1879 to travel to Tibet, hoping to see some action on the way. He went past Baku (which he said was one of the last refuges of the 'fire worshippers', i.e. Zoroastrians), through Persian towns south of the Caspian Sea to Meshed, full of pilgrims. He got permission to drive through Turcoman territory to the great caravan city of Merv. This had been the capital of invading Seljuk Turkish empires in the 11th and 12th centuries. Georgina Herrmann, a friend I knew at the British embassy in Tehran in the 1950s, became a distinguished Professor of archaeology researching Merv's vast site of four ancient cities. But by the 19th century the place was little more than a concourse of predatory Turcoman tribes, which everyone knew the Russians were aiming to attack and occupy. O'Donovan could have met a quick end but, once convinced that he was not a Russian



Journalist, Edmund O'Donovan, elected Chief Khan of Merv, from *Merv: A Story of Adventures and Captivity Epitomized from 'The Merv Oasis' by Edmund O'Donovan, 1883.*

spy, the Chief Khans talked to him, greeted him warmly, accommodated him and eventually elected him as a fellow 'Chief Khan'. After four or five months he was allowed to depart, with a sumptuous feast.

I haven't seen copies of O'Donovan's comprehensive two-volume report on his experiences called *The Merv Oasis* but I do have an excellent 'epitome' of the work, dated 1883, called *The Story of Merv*, which may be a first edition. It includes a splendid picture of the author in Turcoman costume.

O'Donovan didn't get the acclaim in London that I think he deserved, but someone who did get effusive acclaim was the Hungarian linguist and explorer who had visited Central Asia, disguised as a dervish, over a decade before, in the 1860s. Arminius Vambery came from a poor family in a Hungarian village. He was short of stature and lame, but ambitious and hardworking, with an amazing gift for languages. He had soon mastered the main European languages, including Latin and Hebrew, as well as his native Hungarian, and was keen to learn Turkish, Persian and Arabic. He first settled in Constantinople calling himself 'Rashid Effendi', surviving by tutoring and interpreting, though he felt short of money his whole life. Having studied Islam and relevant literatures he was determined to travel through Central Asia disguised as an Islamic holy man, with a great turban. His colloquial Turkish and Chagatai Turkish must have been good enough to convince fellow pilgrims,

officials and local rulers. This was an exceptionally dangerous undertaking. During 1863 he traveled to Khiva and Bokhara, as well as to Samarkand (not seen before by others), returning via Herat, Meshed and Tehran.

Herat had only recently been incorporated back into the Afghan state. Dost Mohammed had also just died and his grandson, Yakub Khan, was acting as Governor. Years later, in exile, Yakub said that he had recognized that Vambery was a European, because he had noticed that he had been beating his foot in time to music, which Asians never did.

Penniless back in Hungary, Vambery was advised to relate his experiences, and what he had learned, above all to experts in London. Greeted by Sir Henry Rawlinson he lectured to enthusiastic audiences in Britain.

He was introduced to Palmerston and other politicians who were very interested in what he could tell them. He met John Murray the publisher and started writing a series of well-received books and articles.

England became his second home. I don't have a copy of the first book of his travels that made Vambery famous, published in 1873, only two volumes of his biographic memoirs, *The Story of my Struggles*, published towards the end of his life in 1904.

This includes names of many people in England who he was proud to have met, such as Richard Burton, Livingstone, Doughty and Godwin-Austen. He had lunch with Charles Dickens at the Athenaeum. As if this is not enough, through Irving he met Bram Stoker, who admitted that he had had an influence over the *Dracula* story! He was invited to Windsor Castle, where Queen Victoria enjoyed his company, and he became genuinely friendly with the Prince of Wales, continuing when the latter became King Edward VII.

He was critical of Russia and attacked by Russophiles, some of whom wrongly doubted the veracity of his accounts. Later he spent time talking to Shah Nasruddin of Persia and in particular the unpredictable Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid. Detailed reports of these conversations were conveyed to British ministers like Rosebury, Salisbury and Grey, who found them very useful, so that he was rewarded with welcome 'travel expenses'. Alder and Dalby's biography of 1979, called

The Dervish of Windsor Castle, pulls Vambery's story together.

Historians and journalists eventually began to appear on the scene. I have an elegantly produced book of 1886 by Charles Marvin, who wrote for the *Newcastle Chronicle*, about exploration between the Caspian and the Indus. It is called *Reconnoitring Central Asia* and covers the Vambery, Burnaby and O'Donovan stories. The latter got less publicity because he had stayed overseas for a year after his exploits and by the time his book appeared his story was less topical. Marvin wrote that whatever one thinks of Russian advances in Central Asia the people there were much better off once the despicable cruelty of the Central Asian Khans and slave owners was no more. This book includes a fine quality engraving of a younger Khan of Khiva that I have not seen elsewhere.



The Khan of Khiva as he, as he appeared at the coronation of Alexander III, from Reconnoitring Central Asia: Pioneering Adventures in the Region Lying Between Russia and India by Charles Marvin, London: Swan Sonnenschein, Le Bas & Lowrey, 1886.

Before moving onto books about the mainstream of Afghan history I need to make a diversion to an area of mystery. One of the most remarkable individuals on the scene from the early part of the 19th century, already described by me as a 'soldier of fortune', was Alexander Gardner, who claimed to be an American (as had Charles Masson – difficult to refute since so little was then known about the New World). He said he had followed a brother across the Atlantic who had worked for the Russians but died from a fall from a horse. On the way he had had schooling in Ireland and visited Scotland. Gardner

told endless stories about fending for himself, joining travelling groups all over Central Asia, visiting Khiva and Yarkand and climbing in the high Pamirs. He admitted having resorted to violence, if necessary, to survive. He lived native-style, passing off as a Muslim, with womenfolk kept private. He may have spent time in Kafiristan, as he claimed, since his accounts of the Kafirs' lifestyle were credible (coinciding with my own experience 130 years later – see *A Passage to*



Alexander Gardner, retired in Kashmir, from The Tartan Turban: In Search of Alexander Gardner by John Keay, London: Kashi House, 2017.

Nuristan (2006)). Some eminent people believed his stories; many thought they were all 'Yeti-like' fantasy. Eventually, after a period in prison in Qandahar, he came through Kabul to the Punjab and in 1832 obtained employment as Ranjit Singh's Director of Artillery, becoming known as 'Gordoner Sahib'. He attached himself to the three Singh brothers, Rajas of Jammu, who were trusted by the Maharajah though they were Hindus not Sikhs. He was involved in the internecine rivalry after Ranjit's death. After making money on salt mines near Multan he followed the surviving senior Singh brother, who had inherited Kashmir, becoming Ghulab Singh's largely ceremonial director of artillery. He remained with the latter's son Ranbir Singh, who continued the line of Maharajahs of Kashmir that lasted until the India-Pakistan partition.

In the 1870s and 1880s Kashmir became a holiday resort, then a popular tourist destination. Gardner became a local celebrity, dressed conspicuously in Scottish tweeds. Some respected figures such as Sir Henry Durand believed his stories. Landseer's nephew did the portrait of him reproduced on the cover of *The Tartan Turban* (2017), a book by the experienced Scottish historian John Keay, stitching together all Gardner stories, with excellent illustrations.

Many individuals with western names in those days will have been of mixed race, such as a Campbell, noted by Burnes as one of Dost Mohammed's effective commanders. Is it an accident that when the Dost's grandson, Amir Abdur Rahman, wrote about his early life in a book edited by Sultan Mahomed Khan (1900), he praised the family's senior commander, General Shir Mahomed Khan, 'who was known in Europe by the name of Campbell'? Keay reminds us that when Alexander Burnes had arrived at the mouth of the Khyber on his second visit to Afghanistan his party were met by a dissolute individual in local dress, living in a cave, who identified himself as Lt. Col. Rattray. This encounter was mentioned in a book to which I might have drawn readers attention before: *Journey to the Source of the River Oxus* (1841) by Lt. John Wood.

Wood was a young naval officer, part of Burnes' team, with the task of reporting on the Indus and other rivers, with possible navigation in mind. Once in Kabul Burnes dispatched Wood and a Dr Lord to report on Kunduz and Turkestan country. Wood coped well with the slave trader Yakub Beg and soon decided to divert eastwards to search for the source of the river Oxus, which he achieved. His account of travelling, almost alone, through Badakhshan and the remote Wakan valley, is very well worth reading, in my view. My copy of the book may be rare.

The French author Ferrier, already mentioned, believed that a number of survivors of the First Anglo-Afghan war were living inconspicuously in local villages, marrying local Afghans or being adopted by them. This could be true of a young man called 'Farangee Bacha' (i.e. foreign child) who turned up in Bombay in 1857. Speaking little English he claimed

to be the son of an English officer, therefore a Christian. And that he had traveled extensively in Afghanistan and beyond. The Governor and others believed him, put him in a school and told him to take the name John Campbell (I assume it is an accident that this name seems common). The young man was sent to England, where his story also convinced Sir John Lawrence and where he dictated the story of his life to a kindly friend, incorporated in a well-produced little book, a curiosity, called *Lost Among the Afghans* (1862). It includes a credible portrait of a man with both European and Asian features. Campbell returned to India and was last heard of as an interpreter in Karachi.

It is time now for the lead up to the Second Anglo-Afghan war of 1878–1880, which turned out to be a closer contest than I had thought.

Nicholas Barrington is former British High Commissioner to Pakistan, Honorary Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge, and a trustee of the Ancient India and Iran Trust.