

## Books about Afghanistan 4

*Nicholas Barrington*

One of the first of the books I acquired about the early 19th century in Central Asia was John Kayes' *History of the War in Afghanistan* – what should now be called the first Anglo-Afghan War – in three small unpretentious volumes. The first edition was published in 1851 and was so popular that there were further editions in 1857, 1875 and 1878. Mine are from the later period, in clear print, full of detailed information, balanced and readable. The events of Britain's major military defeat are put in the broad political context. Kaye recognised British mistakes: faulty assessment of Afghan opinion, bad choice of site for barracks, too many detachments in isolated positions, handing out and then cutting subsidies, allowing officers as well as soldiers to take liberties with Afghan women. His assessment of pioneer Alexander Burnes was fair: overrated at the outset of his involvement and underrated and underused at the end. Many British excesses were admitted, particularly in the final retribution by the army, who destroyed the great bazaar and torched homes of both innocent Hindus and Afghans who had supported us like the Persian-speaking Qizilbash. British policies had been unjust and disastrous.

Few contested this judgement. Having treated Dost Mohammed Khan generously in exile, the British were happy to let him return to assume the throne in Kabul without interference. We were preoccupied by the Sikh Wars and what we called 'The Mutiny', leaving the Afghans to themselves. Little appears to have been written about Afghanistan in this period until the Dost died in 1863, respected for his good judgement and long tenure. By then two of his potential successors had died of ill health. Disease was, of course, widely prevalent, including among the British, who suffered in particular from cholera and malaria.

Large areas of South West India including the Frontier, Sind and neighbouring Baluchistan, which had loosely owed allegiance to the Afghan state, were little known,

but the directors of the East Indian Company, far away in Calcutta, began to realise that they would be significant for the defence of British India. They included the lower river and delta of the Indus and the vestigial Karachi port. The large British army on the way to Kabul to depose Dost Mohammed in the 1840s had had difficulties in the area, dealing brusquely and discourteously with the ruling Baluch Talpur Amirs in Sind, where Henry Pottinger was political agent, though they had been ready to be helpful. Further on so had the ruling Khan of Kalat when the army entered his territory. Minor attacks on the troops had been wrongly blamed on the Khan through his internal enemies and Burnes had inexcusably diverted course to attack and kill him in his fortified palace in central Baluchistan. Burnes tried to put a relative in his place, which didn't last long.

Baluchistan was a vast thinly populated and economically deprived area that extended to the borders of Persia and covered the Southern approaches to Qandahar and Afghanistan. A wide range of turbulent tribes recognised the Khan of Kalat as their nominal leader but continually made difficulties for him. A measured account of the history of Kalat and the chief Khan's family is continued in my very small black bound book *The Country of Baluchistan* by A.W. Hughes FRGS, published in 1877. The author drew from accounts by Henry Pottinger and also by Charles Masson who had spent a difficult time there, recorded in the fourth volume of his memoirs. There are early photographs of fierce looking hirsute Baluch leaders, with a map and some vocabulary.

The British decided to recognise the authority of the Kalat family including the old Khan's young son. They concentrated on turning Quetta, near the Afghan border, into a military base, important for the retreat from Kabul, but lost control of Kalat state which became again quasi-independent. At one time a young, arrogant and ill-informed British lieutenant called Loveday who was left in charge was killed and paraded naked round Kalat city.

Several wise British officers, including Major Outram, sought to get to know the Baluch tribes, including the



*The Baluch Brahui Sardar, Ghulam Jan, and followers, from The Country of Balochistan: Its Geography, Topography, Ethnology and History, by A.W. Hughes, London: George Bell & Sons, 1877.*

militant Marris and Bugtis living up in the Frontier near the Sind border, and establish understanding with them; for example, to let merchant caravans pass peacefully with an agreed fee. Outram also worked for relations of trust with the Sind Amirs. But then came on the scene one of the most controversial and colourful British operators in India who had the reputation of being both villain and hero. With no previous experience of India, Sir Charles Napier, already 60 years old, was catapulted into the military command of Upper and Lower Sind.

Born into an impecunious military family with connections to Charles James Fox and Hanoverian royals, Napier had been a badly wounded casualty in the battle of Corunna and again in Spain later in the Peninsular War where he was captured and in due course released by Napoleon's Marshall Ney. He served as a resident officer in the British Ionian Islands, where he sympathised with Greek independence and made friends with Lord Byron. After a period in charge of Northern Command in the UK he was delighted at an Indian posting, with chances of military glory and prize money.

After first expressing admiration of Outram ('Bayard' was Napier's idea) Napier began to think that Outram and his like were too conciliatory to people who were a threat to the

British Raj and that all disturbance and disaffection should be treated firmly and, if necessary, brutally. Calcutta did not disagree. Once the troops at his disposal had been augmented, Napier found an excuse to launch attacks on the Talpur families, which he led personally. After battles at Miani and Hyderabad thousands of dead bodies were littered on the ground. Divided among family members the Amirs surrendered. They were captured and robbed of all their riches. Serious opposition came only from a nephew who was chased into the desert. I found it interesting that this man's army collapsed once his senior military expert, a freed African slave, was killed in battle. Napier was promoted to be Governor of Sind and was reported to have sent home the famous pun: 'Peccavi', meaning 'I have sinned', though this was probably an invention of *Punch* magazine.

Outram believed that the Amirs had been wronged and expressed his views so strongly that he was dismissed. He continued to set out his critical views in two slim hard-backed volumes of mine called *The Conquest of Scinde*, 1846, that contain a commentary on events from his point of view. Britain had not acted in good faith. Strange while Outram was still a serving officer?

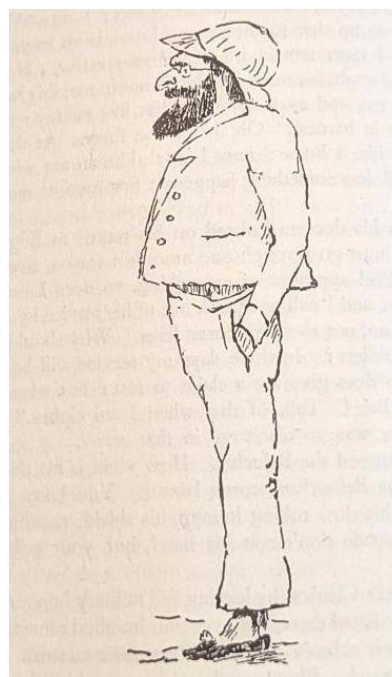
A distant Napier relative, Rosamund Lawrence, in her biography of 1952, admitted that Napier had many faults – explosive character, obstinate bad temper and ill-informed decision-making – but pointed out that he always worked hard to improve his men's conditions, which made him popular. He is the other soldier, alongside Havelock, who is commemorated by a statue in Trafalgar Square. It is inscribed as erected by public subscription, the most numerous contribution being from private soldiers. I have a slight link with Napier in that I inherited from an aunt a tall (15.5 inches) ceramic Staffordshire figure of a handsome soldier carrying the name 'Sir Charles Napier'. It is clear from authenticated drawings that he was, in fact, short and stunted with large glasses and a face disfigured by old injury. And he was known for being scruffily dressed. I have always loved Staffordshire pottery which is not particularly elegant or refined, and



Left: My Staffordshire figure of Sir Charles Napier. Right: An authenticated sketch of Napier, from Charles Napier: *Friend and Fighter*, by Rosamund Lawrence, London: John Murray, 1952.

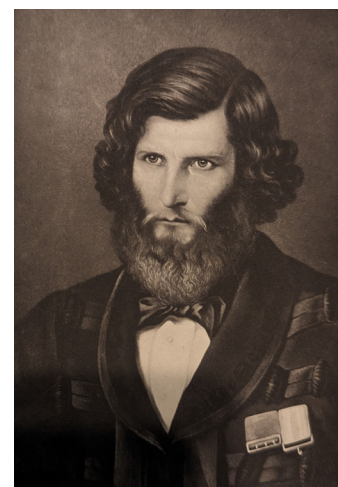
used to be reasonable in price. It is a type of folk art too little valued by museum curators, in my view. It often portrays people in the public eye, like Napier. In this case, against evidence, they were determined to show him as a handsome hero.

Fortunately for Britain's reputation, a number of British men now became highly regarded throughout Sind and the Frontier, unlike Napier. John Jacob, son of a Somerset vicar, was an able soldier who distinguished himself in fighting when required but took great trouble to get to know the Baluch tribesmen and be trusted by them. He shared the views of Outram, corresponded frequently with him and became a life-long friend. Firm but fair, and always honest, he became commander of the Sind Horse, an irregular cavalry unit. In due course, thanks to his hard work and success in solving troublesome problems, he was appointed Commander of the Frontier. He worked to provide a better life for local people, including having canals dug. A stiffly bound biography of 1900 by Alexander Shand, in the library of the Ancient India and Iran Trust, suggested that Jacobs' 'recreation was in toil'. He built himself an admired modern house at his base, a little town near the Afghan border that became known as Jacobabad. It still is so called in Pakistan. Jacob was an inventor who worked on artillery and



agriculture machines, among other things, and delighted in philosophical and theological studies. He made a complex mechanically advanced clock which I was shown proudly, still working (130 years old), when I visited the house in about 1990. The reason that Jacob took little local leave, attended few conferences and wrote numerous letters to everyone may be found in the mention in the biography that he was embarrassed by a serious stutter problem.

Convincing his superiors that peace in Kalat State, though not directly of Britain's concern, was crucial for the peace in the Frontier and Sind, Jacob



John Jacob from General John Jacob: *Commandant of the Sind Irregular Horse and Founder of Jacobabad* by Alexander Innes Shand, London: Seeley and Co., 1900.



(now Brigadier-General) tactfully spoke to the young Chief Khan and persuaded him to sacrifice some of his independence for a subsidy, a satisfactory outcome for all. In 1859, at the age of only 46, Jacob died of 'exhaustion'. He insisted on a local funeral absent of pomp and parade but was widely mourned by friends, both native and European.

Sir Robert Sandeman was a more conventional figure, but equally distinguished, admired and loved by people in Baluchistan and the Frontier. Born in Perth, he studied at St. Andrews, joined the Indian army and was brave and wounded in the 'Mutiny' (his horse was shot under him). He took the route of administration rather than soldiering. By 1866 he was Political Officer in Dera Ghazi Khan. My biography of *Colonel Sir Robert Sandeman, his life and work in the Indian Frontier* by T.H. Thornton, published in 1895, is in good condition. Its account is thorough and comprehensive, with some good photographs. He coped skilfully with Pathan and Baluch tribal problems in a policy of 'peace and good-will but not coercion'. The Chief Khan of Kalat State known to Jacob had been poisoned, probably by his own Vizir, and succeeded by a younger brother, Mir Khodadad Khan, who was weaker. The state and its borders became so disordered that key local routes, such as the Bolan Pass between Sibi and Quetta, were unusable. It was eventually agreed that Sandeman was the man to go to the Khan and offer to mediate between him and his squabbling tribal chiefs, which was achieved in visits in 1876 and 1877, after which Sandeman was officially appointed 'Agent to the Governor General for Baluchistan'.

With wide travel and constant meetings (though he preferred to rest on Sundays) Sandeman was soon thanked and praised for the sound security that enabled British troops to go backwards and forwards to Afghanistan (actually the other way round) during the second Anglo-Afghan War. Among honours given he was knighted with the Star of India. Lord Curzon was reported to have greeted him at one point as the 'hero of many bloodless victories'. In 1892 when visiting the small state of Las Bela near Karachi, Sandeman, normally very fit, caught pleurisy



Left: Sir Robert Sandeman. Right: Mir Khodadad Khan, both from *Colonel Sir Robert Sandeman: His Life and Work on Our Indian Frontier* by Thomas Henry Thornton, London: John Murray, 1895.

badly, died quite quickly and was buried locally in a modest tomb which still existed when I was there. A town in the hills near the Afghan border is still called Fort Sandeman. The Khan of Kalat was angry, saying that he should have been buried in Kalat State. According to my book the Khan was deposed by the British a year later for an 'act of savagery'; he was imprisoned and died in Lorelai in 1909. It sounds suspicious.

I have only recently read the so-called autobiography, published in Karachi in 1975, of the last of the line of ruling Khans of Kalat. He had apparently succeeded in 1931 after another turbulent period. The state was still notionally independent though by now effectively controlled by the British. The author includes his version of the state's history and is very critical of the British but much more blisteringly critical of the Pakistan Government for the way that President Iskander Mirza and General Ayub forcibly invaded Baluchistan in 1955 and robbed him and his family of all their historic possessions. He had earlier got on well with Muhammad Ali Jinnah and agreed to a merger with Pakistan but it should have been done with consent.

I am still frustrated by one point in the whole story. The huge fortified rock palace of the Khans in the centre of Kalat used to be a prominent landmark, visible in the drawings and

photographs in books. When was it demolished, presumably by the British, to assert the end of Kalat's independence? The only time I visited I was cordially welcomed by a son of the former Khan at a spacious modern house. The only sign of past grandeur was a very large and extremely fine Persian carpet, which I advised him to take care of.

Before leaving Sind there are two more names that should be mentioned. Sir Bartle Frere was a highly competent and impeccably moral civil servant who became Commissioner of Sind after Napier's departure. He shared Jacob's views, was admired by all and loved by many. One of the main public buildings in Karachi is still named after him. His achievements are described in Philip Woodruff's books *The Men Who Ruled India*, published in 1954, which are useful for reference. His portrait is the frontispiece of Volume II. After Sind he became Governor of Bombay. Woodruff tells us that on the way home from India he did good work in South Africa, including when posted to Zanzibar to try and induce the Sultan to give up his extensive slavery operations. He was firm, and against all expectations, he succeeded.

Richard Burton is well known as the explorer who went to Mecca in disguise, translated *The Arabian Nights* and sought the source of

the Nile. It is less known that his first oriental expeditions were, for seven years, at age of 21, in Sind. He was a brilliant linguist who became interpreter for Napier. He wrote four books on Sind. I have a modern, Pakistan printed copy of *Sind Revisited*, which he originally wrote after his travels in 1848 and revised, after a later visit, published in 1877. His political comments were extremely pro-empire, but his accounts of places, people and customs are full of information. One of the other books was on falconry. Another, on the boy brothels of Karachi, is lost. He and Napier probably agreed to destroy it.

On the subject of Burton, I ought to mention that during the last of my journeys in the Sindh countryside before retiring as British High Commissioner, I stayed with a local landowner friend where a fellow guest was Christopher Ondaatje. Born in Sri Lanka, a public benefactor and brother of the poet and novelist Michael Ondaatje, he was a great admiror of Burton. He told me of his plan to follow the trail of all places in India that Burton had visited and talk to as many people as possible who knew about him. The result was his impressive book, with most photographs by the author, called *Sindh Revisited: A Journey in the Footsteps of Captain Sir Richard Burton*, published in 1996. He successfully explored local scholars' views of Burton's linguistic skills and interest in religions, and especially his fascination with the forbidden. Conversation ranged widely that delightful evening and I rather rashly revealed my personal views about the future of Kashmir. I was surprised to find that they were quoted in the book, though quite accurately. But it was fortunately not published until after I retired.

This long diversion is now over. I will next revert to Afghanistan proper in the lead-up to the second Anglo-Afghan War.

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*Fortress Palace of the Khan of Kalat, from Colonel Sir Robert Sandeman: His Life and Work on Our Indian Frontier by Thomas Henry Thornton, London: John Murray, 1895.*