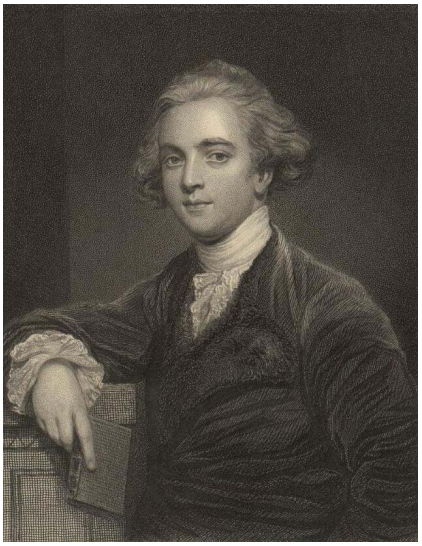
Books about Afghanistan 7

Nicholas Barrington

This was meant to be the last of seven papers about the history of Afghanistan, as seen through my books of the period. It covers the large area of what is now northern Pakistan, between Afghanistan and Kashmir, north of the Punjab and south of the Wakhan Corridor. Flowing through it from north to south and east to west are the source and early reaches of the great Indus river. It is a little-known mountainous region in the shadow of Asia's three immense mountain ranges: the Himalayas, the Pamirs and the Hindu Kush, providing only a few precipitous pathways for tribes and ethnic groups to find richer pastures and other resources further south. The most recent of these invasions came not from the north but from Iran in the west, led by someone who has been called the last of the world's military adventurers, Nader Shah.

These events took place in the 18th century, before the period covered by most of my books, but I do possess one fine first edition of 1773 about *The History of the Life of Nader Shah, King of Persia*, which I decided to take a closer look at. It is by the distinguished British Indian jurist and oriental scholar, Sir William Jones (1746–94), professor of Sanskrit, based in Calcutta. As philologist he traced the Indo-European language links across the Euro-Asian landmass. This seems to have been an early



Sir William Jones (c. 1840), from the Welsh Portrait Collection at the National Library of Wales, via Wikimedia Commons.

work with which he was doing a favour for the King of Denmark, who had made him a Fellow of the Royal Society of Copenhagen to go with his British honours. His preface discusses world historians. The Nader Shah text was 'extracted from an eastern manuscript'. I cannot recall how I acquired this beautiful little volume, which is a pleasure to hold in the hand.

The narrative starts with Nader Shah's birth in 1688 into an ordinary family of tribal Afshars in Northern Iran. Full of energy and charisma he decided as a young man to help the last Shahs of the Saffavid dynasty to get rid of the brutal Ghilzai Afghans from Qandahar who had suddenly attacked and occupied the Persian capital of Isfahan. His assistance was welcomed and with a series of local victories in the field he soon became hugely popular among the Iranian people, based in Meshed. He was made commander of the Shah's armies, then Regent when a child had inherited. In due course army commanders elected him formally as Shah of Iran. After chasing Afghans back home he achieved control over all former Saffavid lands.

The story races through his travels and victories. He forced the Ottoman Turks to withdraw from Azerbaijan and pursued their (larger) armies into what is modern-day Iraq with major battles around Baghdad. The reputation of his armies was such, combined with his political skills, that smaller States and cities surrendered, rather than risk destruction. Armenia, Khwarazm (Khiva) and Bokhara were occupied, also Herat, described as 'pleasantly situated, remarkable for the delightfulness of the gardens that surrounded it'. Some Afghans were part of his troops, but he had to use considerable force to defeat independent Afghan tribes, after which he travelled north of the Khyber to invade India down the straight road to Lahore and Delhi, where the pleasure-loving Moghul Emperor surrendered and his nobles showered Nader with gifts. The Shah seized the crown jewels and many treasures including the Peacock throne, which he sent back to Iran. Also, the Koh-i-noor diamond, which he began to wear on his arm. At one point many of his Persian troops were killed in a local riot, after which thousands of Indians in that part of

Nader Shah (from a picture at the India Office), from Nadir Shah *by Sir Mortimer Durand, London: Archibald Constable and Co Ltd.*

Delhi were massacred, but this didn't seem to stop inter-family marriages or celebrations. The emperor was happy to cede control over all his territories west and north of the Indus River and was then personally reinstated in his own office and palaces. Sindh, part of Punjab, the frontier and northern territories were now part of the Persian / Afghan empire. Returning through Sindh, and resting in Qandahar, Nader Shah now enjoyed more victories and triumphs on the borders of the old Persian Empire. He often fought personally in the forefront of his troops.

In due course Nader suffered some health problems and began to feel his age. A key point was when a failed assassination attempt was attributed by some in his circle to his eldest son Reza Kuli. In a fit of rage, he had his son blinded, which he regretted too late with remorse. Note the link with Mortimer Durand's romantic novel already mentioned, though according to Jones' book this took place in 1743, some years before Nader's death. There were further potential rebellions in Nader's vast territories and, at the age of 60, when the Shah was looking forward to comfortable retirement in his favourite fortress of Kalat-i-Nadiri, north of Meshed, he was killed sleeping in his tent, not far away, in 1747. His body was exposed at the camp while army leaders had a long debate about the succession. According to Jones's book Nader's nephew Ali had already been planning to take over and had bribed the guards who had killed the Shah. The leaders of the army 'thought

it advisable to declare for Ali'. His rival Ahmed, who had always been loyal to Nader Shah, made an effort to revenge his death and attacked the chiefs, but was repelled and 'retreated in despair to Qandahar.' Ali made haste to seize the treasures from Kalat, also the bodies of the princes, his cousins, all of whom, with the exception of a beautiful boy called Shahrokh, whom he detained, he had killed. He was crowned Ali Shah but was dissolute and incompetent. He appointed his brother Ibrahim to be governor of Isfahan, but the latter, also ruthless and ambitious, raised troops to fight Ali Shah and in a battle many of Ali's troops defected to him. Ibraham was declared Shah, but both men were killed in further battles. Although attacked and blinded by another forgotten relative the intelligent young Shahrukh survived to become Shah of Iran, at least in name.

'Thus in a period of 60 years', reads the narrative, 'one of the most beautiful empires in the world was so drenched in blood, and so torn in calamities, that no competent heir remained'. 'A single man of no high birth raised his country to the highest pitch of grandeur and left it at his death no less distressed than ever. Such are the miseries which naturally flow from the immoderate love of dominion, such are the fruits of military glory, and such the fate of those kingdoms whose rulers prefer the pride of conquest to the calmer joys of peace and the welfare of their people.' It is not clear to what extent this is the view of the manuscript or of William Jones himself. Am I wrong to think that these comments are still relevant today, 270 years later?

Jones' book gives no further information about what happened in Ahmed's eastern section of the Iranian empire which now became the first Kingdom of Afghanistan, created in 1747. It describes Ahmed as 'valiant' but doesn't mention that he was an Afghan. As an amateur student of Afghan history, as I became before my posting to Kabul in 1959, I was led to believe that Ahmed Shah Abdali (later Durrani) had been commander of Nader Shah's bodyguard who had moved quickly to seize most of the royal jewels before establishing his new Kingdom, based first in Qandahar. We were told little about what had happened in Iran.

Nader Shah, from Hanway's 'Travels', from Nadir Shah *by Sir Mortimer Durand.*

It may seem distracting in this series of papers about the 19th century to provide the foregoing material about Nader Shah in the 18th century, before the British and British books arrived on the scene. But it is relevant as background. William Jones' little book went to print only 26 years after Nader's death. After the main section about his life the book includes A brief history of Asia and information about Persian language and literature, with texts of some Persian poems in good clear original print, worth further study.

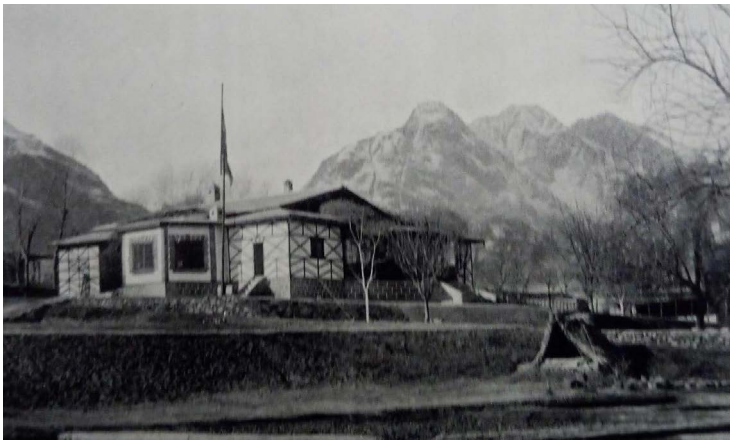
Now forward at last to the 19th century. Afghans had retreated back to the border to be agreed in the Durand negotiations. The Sikh empire had come and gone, replaced by the British spreading westwards from their original base in Bengal. Kashmir was a quasi-independent 'native state', accepting British authority, claiming loose sovereignty over the multitude of little kingdoms to their west. These had their own rulers, languages and customs and the British were happy to leave them to themselves. There were few British travellers to the area except the explorer George Hayward, who had been brutally murdered in Yasin in 1870, which did cause some concern. It was stories of trouble between Kashmir forces and the two most independent minded states controlling the main road into China (Hunza and Nagar) that prompted the British authorities to send a small inquiry mission into the area. Chosen as leader was the youngest of the Durand brothers, Colonel Algernon Durand, about whom I said that I would be writing further. Enterprising and self-confident he welcomed the task and soon linked up with an Indian official of similar character, Dr G.S. Robertson, who became his companion and friend, deputy and eventual successor.

They started off by getting to know as many of the local rulers as possible, beginning with Chitral. This state, about the size of Wales, had had most contact with the outside world since it consisted of a long valley lying alongside the Afghan border. It was accessible north of Peshawar beyond the two little semi-independent Pathan states, Dir and Swat. But the Chitralis were proud to have their own language, ceremonies and traditions of dance, suggesting a Central Asian inheritance. I have several local books about events at this time but the clearest and the most readable narrative is in Durand's own unpretentious little book (only 4 by 6 inches), which is easy to overlook: *The Making of a Frontier* published in 1900 by Thomas Nelson and Sons. The frontispiece portrait, as so often, is sadly missing. The ruler of Chitral at this time, called the 'Mehtar', was an old man called Aman-ol-Molk. He had been firmly in charge since 1857. He was pro-British but expected subsidies and gifts in return. He treated Durand's first visit like a state visit, with spectacular dancing and welcoming ceremonies, well described in the book. Nobles were dressed in brilliantly coloured velvets and silks, often embossed and decorated with gold. Durand wrote that 'it was impossible not to be taken with the Chitralis'. Putting aside their natural avarice and treachery, and cruelty among themselves, 'they were pleasant to meet, fond of sport, courteous and hospitable, with a great love of their country'. 'They were bright, cheery, full of laughter and song, devoted to polo and dancing.'

There was no town between the capital of Kashmir, Srinagar, and Afghanistan but the village of Gilgit was a convenient communication centre astride the road and river

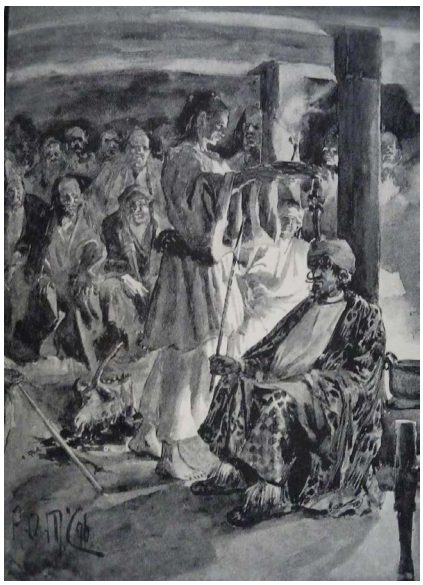
which led north to Hunza, Nagar and the Chinese border. Algernon Durand was now appointed British Agent at Gilgit, the first British officer to hold this post. He got it organised, with a limited personal security contingent. He made an early visit to Hunza and Nagar, to meet the rulers, called 'Thums', and tried to agree with them a code of conduct that would prevent the chance of war. Hunza and Nagar had traditionally raided neighbouring states, capturing prisoners who, with some of their own subjects, they would sell across the border to China as slaves. This was a main source of income. Durand was not impressed by the young sickly Thum of Hunza, Safdar Ali, who had links with China and was not disposed to be very friendly to the British. Durand knew that he had had his own father and other relatives killed.

On another visit to Chitral with Robertson, the latter, who had long been fascinated by the community of Kafirs that existed inside Afghanistan near the Chitral border, hoped to visit them. They had not yet been overrun by Amir Abdul Rahman's Afghan forces. Kafir means, of course, unbeliever and infidel. This unique group of tribes had resisted conversion to Islam and other major world religions. After meeting a few Kafirs living in Chitral Robertson believed that he could persuade enough of their tribal leaders to let him visit and learn, unarmed as a friend. So far, few outsiders had tried to visit because of the impossible terrain (no roads, nor horses) and the people's fierce independence and aptitude for violence. Local people thought that this would be a suicide mission but in the autumn of 1885 the Government of India, and less enthusiastically the Mehtar of Chitral, agreed to let Robertson see what he could do. After a short visit to Kamdesh, the biggest Kafir village in the northeast, which passed off without major incident, Robertson checked again with London and Delhi and then succeeded in living among the Kafirs for almost a year. He developed friendships with a number of leading men (one became a blood brother in a type of religious ceremony) and despite some tricky moments survived unscathed just before fighting started with Hunza, for which Durand was happy to find him a senior role. His great book *The Kafirs of the Hindu Kush*, of 650 pages, with map and illustrations, was published several years later in 1896. Containing so much information, gathered at risk about an unknown people, it is a remarkable publication. For me, when I decided to visit Nuristan (as Kafiristan was now called) with two diplomatic colleagues in 1960, Robertson was a hero. I will have had access to his book in the Kabul embassy's rich library. I see that I bought my own copy a few years later from Arthur Probstein, one of the few specialised oriental booksellers near the British Museum in London. Many of his rare books, closely squeezed together in a basement, were lost later in a local flood. I thought that I had perused then every word of Robertson's book but when studying it recently I found that quite a lot of the pages were still uncut! Half of the chapters contain the narrative of Robertson's activities and experiences, half covered the way of life, beliefs and practises of the Kafir tribes. He revealed that they enjoyed a sort of democracy conducted through tribal leaders.



The Agency House, Gilgit, from Chitral: The Story of a Minor Siege *by Sir George S. Robertson, London: Methuen & Co., 1898.*

I must let the book speak for itself. The useful map shows regions that he visited. Only in one area, the Presun Valley, did they coincide with places that I saw. There are no photographs but numerous illustrations by a named artist (A.D. McCormick), with no indication of whether he had been with Robertson inside or what he had based his pictures on. Faces depicted do not have the clarity of some photographs of Kafirs in other publications. Looking again I was delighted to find that one prominent Kafir was shown holding a dagger very like the one that I myself purchased from a Kafir from the Waigel tribe in the southeast. There is a picture of it in our book about our 1960 journey *A Passage to Nuristan* published in 2006. I had thought that the design was local to the Waigels but it may have been followed throughout Kafiristan which makes me value the dagger more.

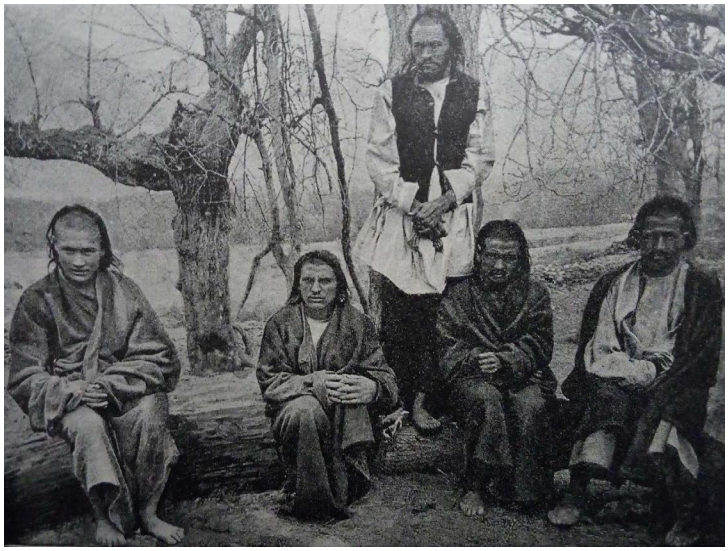


Left: The Sanowkun Ceremony (an example of one of their ceremonies).
Right: Torag Merak with dagger (note the dagger design), from The Kafirs of the Hindu Kush *by Sir George Scott Robertson. London: Lawrence & Bullen, 1896.*

Much time would be needed to absorb all that Robertson discovered about Kafir religion and practices. At the end of the book he mentions, with a poor picture, the tradition of at least the Kam tribe to erect large wooden images of departed individuals a year after their death, with appropriate ceremony. First visitors were much impressed by these images, often with fine carving. Several survive in certain museums. Some were probably destroyed because non-Islamic.

Left: A Kafir grave effigy (about 6.5 ft tall), Kabul Museum, brought to Kabul by Amir Abdur Rahman Khan after defeat and conversion of Kafirs to Islam, 1895–96, from Afghanistan *by Louis Dupree, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978.*
Below: Idols also brought by Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, from An American Engineer in Afghanistan: From the Letters and Notes of A.C. Jewett, *edited by Marjorie Jewett Bell, Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1948.*

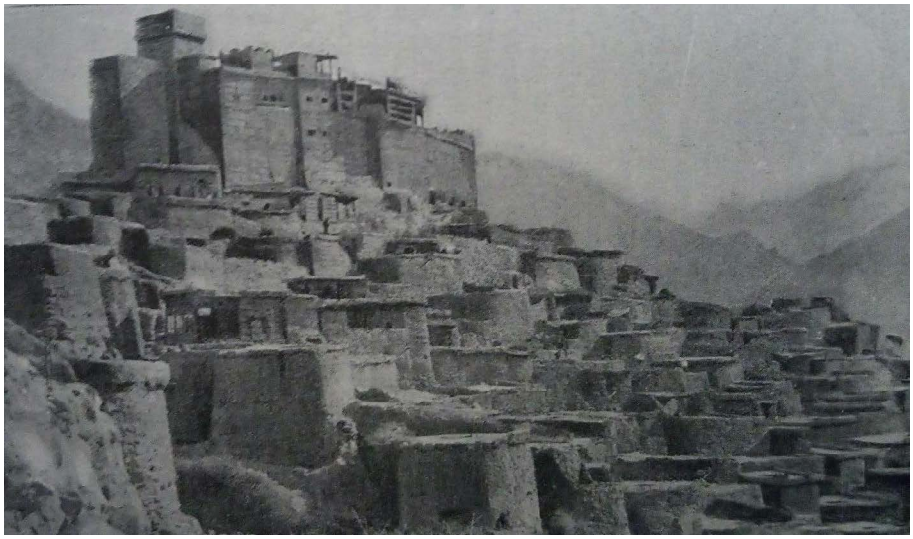
Back in Gilgit the rulers of Hunza and Nagar were breaking the agreements made to keep peace in the area and were arming. They refused to allow the completion of a workable road to the Chinese border which the British considered indispensable. Durand had made full plans to impose discipline on the border villages and had recruited some keen young British officers to help this task. At an early stage in the fighting Durand himself was wounded in the knee. He advised in his book that the best account of the dramatic battles leading to victory



Kafirs, from Where Three Empires Meet: A Narrative of Recent Travel in Kashmir, Western Tibet, Gilgit, and the Adjoining Countries *by E.F. Knight, London, New York and Bombay: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1905.*

should best be found in the book by his friend E.F. Knight: *Where Three Empires Meet* (published in 1905). I have two copies of this little book with its grand sounding title, one of them rebound, both are marked 'new impression'. The empires involved were British, Chinese and Russian, the latter never far from British minds. The print is clear and easy to read, with a useful map and some sketches of battle sites. Numerous illustrations, but no picture of the author who is something of a mystery. He appears to have been a professional writer, with several books to his name, who was originally embarking on a tour to Kashmir and neighbouring territories. Arriving at Bombay at the beginning of 1891 he visited Rawalpindi and Murree, Lahore and Agra, where he saw the Taj Mahal, 'surely the fairest building ever raised by men'. After staying at Srinagar he went on to Ladakh, through Baltistan on the road to Gilgit, at one point attracted by the latest popular craze for Asian golf. Soon he became aware that fighting could be expected at the frontier region, towards which he obtained permission to travel. He was happy to enrol in a Punjab volunteer force, attending briefings and taking orders as if he were a soldier.

He gives us basic information about Hunza and Nagar, two villages which hated each other but combined if threatened by outsiders. Hunza people belonged to an obscure branch of Sunni Islam but drank plenty of alcohol. Those of Nagar were Shias who didn't drink. Rulers of both were 'ignorant and bloodthirsty scoundrels, faithless to treaty obligations and

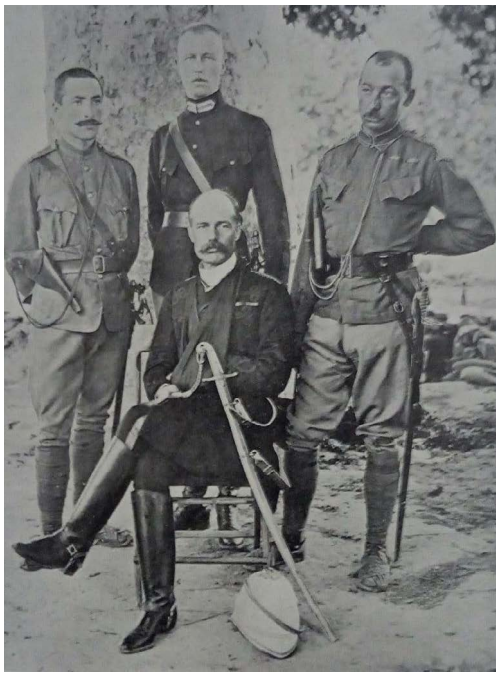


Hunza Fort, from Where Three Empires Meet: A Narrative of Recent Travel in Kashmir, Western Tibet, Gilgit, and the Adjoining Countries *by E.F. Knight, London, New York and Bombay: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1905.*

incapable of respecting anything but force'. The detailed account of Durand's campaign is worth reading, with extreme bravery, and enterprise, and loss of life, on both sides. Victory for the British was by no means certain but eventually the Thum of Hunza fled his castle, with treasures and 100 men, for the Chinese border. A chasing force, in which Knight participated, failed to reach them in time. Final celebrations apparently included Hunza and Nagar people, happy to have lost their tyrannical rulers. Knight enjoyed a victory dinner which included, for change, excellent beef. The deserted Hunza fort contained a fine library and collection of antiquities. Knight does not say whether these were taken as booty or left to the uncontroversial relative appointed the new Thum of Hunza, who with a Nagar counterpart, accepted sovereignty of Queen Victoria.

Problems were not over for Algernon Durand. There was a series of risings halfway down the Indus, at Chilas, to which Robertson had to give attention. The old Mehtar of Chitral died and the succession became bloody. But after five years as political agent Algernon Durand was required to move on to be Military Secretary to the Viceroy. He knew that he had taken risks, but his decisions had been endorsed. It took him five years before he completed *The Making of a Frontier*, published in 1900. He wrote that he had enjoyed the privilege of working with some of the world's most remote people, 'where the foot of a European had never trod,' 'among the most magnificent scenery the eye of man has ever looked upon'.

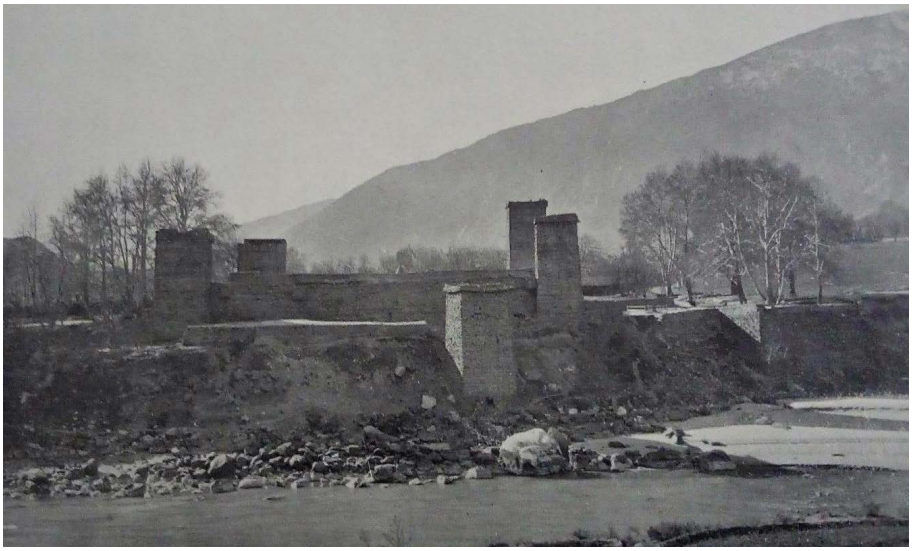
Chitral was left to his successor. The crisis there gave rise to two of my books. *The Relief of Chitral* by two Younghusband brothers, one of whom became a well-known explorer, was published in 1895, while *Chitral, the Story of a Minor Siege* was published by our friend G.S. Robertson himself, writer about the Kafirs, in 1898. The first is better to start with. It gives an overall view of the way that the political situation in Chitral had quickly deteriorated after the death of the old Mehtar and the measures taken to deal with it. Two of the old Mehtar's sons were killed, one after another, and his forgotten brother, who had been in exile in Kabul, teamed up with a Pathan, Umra Khan, from the southwest, to take over and rule the state together while the British were far away at Gilgit. Exhausted, and probably desperate for a long bout of home leave, Robertson decided that he should take the difficult road to Chitral himself to sort things out and arranged for other officers, with local troops and stores, to join him by different routes. Once there he thought that he had persuaded a group of Chitrali nobles to support his choice of another son of the old Mehtar, a 10 year old boy called Shuja-ul-Molk to be the new Mehtar.



Above: Four officers, survivors of the Chitral siege, including the only photograph of G.S. Robertson, who was wounded.
Below left: Shuja-al-Molk, the child appointed Mehtar.
Below right: Colonel Kelly, from Chitral: The Story of a Minor Siege *by Sir George S. Robertson.*

But Robertson discovered too late that public opinion throughout Chitral was changing in an anti-British direction, probably helped by a fanatical Mullah from the Peshawar area supporting the aims of Umra Khan and his partner. An expedition from Chitral Fort to check local dissension in the area resulted in casualties and some only just got back. In March and April 1895 Robertson found himself isolated and besieged in the Fort with about 500 local troops and only 6 British officers, some wounded. They had barely enough food, water and ammunition. A few other groups of officers, men and supplies were lost in the countryside, captured and some killed. Local guides had been essential and local messengers were needed to enable Robertson to communicate with his government by letter. Eventually the Indian government did realise the danger of the situation and that rescue was needed. A body of armed forces moved from the Peshawar area and Punjab towards Umra Khan's territory, and Colonel Kelly, military commander at Gilgit, started a long difficult northern journey to Chitral.

In his substantial book Robertson describes in great vivid detail (sometimes too much detail) the measures that he and his companions had to take to survive. The enemy were close around and he couldn't trust visitors, except by day. He did not trust his captors, who sent regular letters urging him to surrender under safe conduct. A protected walkway to secure essential water for the Fort from the nearby river had to be



Chitral Fort as seen from the river, from Chitral: The Story of a Minor Siege *by Sir George S. Robertson.*

defended. An attempt to set a mine under one of the towers had to be stopped. Because of snipers exercise on the fort's battlements could only be taken at night (Presumably there was no moon?). Horse meat became regrettably necessary.

Kelly's men arrived first, to great rejoicing. The story had become known worldwide. Messages of congratulation arrived from Queen Victoria, the Viceroy and many others, including General Roberts. Robertson was knighted. He and his fellow officers congratulated themselves that they had saved the situation with help from no other British soldiers. The local forces that had supported them included Kashmiris, Sikhs, Gurkas and even Hunza levies, created after the campaign. Although some 40 had been killed and more injured they had all maintained loyalty to the British. Chitrali opinion, always tending to favour the strong, moved again to support the new young Mehtar and his British supporters. The area remained generally peaceful. When I used to visit Chitral as High Commissioner between 1990 and 94 many of the prominent people were descendants of that brave little Mehtar, Shuja-ul-molk. A later book about the siege, *Much Sounding of Bugles* (1975), adds little to the story, but usefully tells us what happened to many of its heroes. Rather surprisingly Robertson left India in 1901. Perhaps exhausted after spending time on his books. He was elected a Liberal Democrat MP for Bradford. He died in 1916. I might mention that when I visited Kipling's Sussex home 'Batemans' as a tourist I notice that Robertson's Kafir book was in the small library. It has been suggested that the book had some influence on Kipling 's famous short story 'The Man who would be King', made into a film.

This paper is already far too long. I'm afraid that one more (8th) paper will be required to cover some omissions and tie up some odds and ends. It will include reporting on a book about travelling west of Kashmir in 1935 called *Between the Oxus and the Indus* by Colonel Schomberg, who believed that Durand was surprisingly harsh on the former Thum of Hunza, Safdar Ali.

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