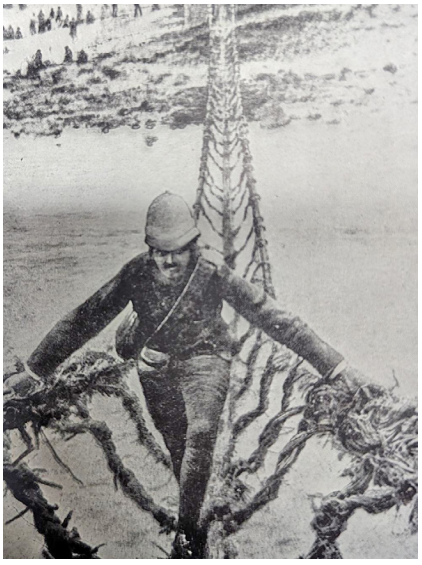
Books about Afghanistan 8

Nicholas Barrington

This is the 8th and last paper (really the last!) about the history of Afghanistan and Central Asia in the 19th century, as seen through my books of the period. I shall start with the book that doesn't belong because it was published in 1935 (Martin Hopkinson Ltd.), but I was affected by its title *Between the Oxus and the Indus*. It covers the area between Afghanistan and Kashmir, and its problems, dealt with in my last paper (No.7). The author is a Colonel R.C.F. Schomberg, about whom I know little, except that he was a scholar and amateur anthropologist who had travelled widely (older books rarely had the paper covers which now usually contain useful information about authors).

It is surprising that little seemed to have changed since the days of Colonel Algernon Durand. Schomberg took difficult and often dangerous routes between the variety of small states in the area, through thick forest and desert, often by precipitous passes, roads clinging to hillsides and scary rope bridges. Some routes were blocked in certain seasons and avalanches were unpredictable. But he loved the dramatic countryside, interspersed with patches of cultivation and a profusion of flowers and fruits: apples, pears, peaches, pomegranates and mulberries thrived, and especially apricots in northern villages. Different states still had their own forms of government with individual rulers, often called Mirs or Rajahs, owing loose allegiance to Kashmir. Life could be hard but singing and dancing were popular. Even the smallest villages had a strip of flat land for polo. There could be violent internal blood-feuds but people were hospitable to strangers. Schomberg writes in some detail about the local beliefs, customs and way of life. He had friendly relations with most of the rulers and regard for those of the larger states in the north such as Yasin, Punyal, Ishkashem and Nagar and Hunza. The Thum of the latter, Nazim Mohamed, was a man of wisdom and good judgement. He was the half brother of Safdar Ali, appointed to succeed him after the fighting. Schomberg would often meet Safdar Ali as an old impoverished man in Yarkand, China, where he died in 1930. He thought that he had never been so wicked as Durand had claimed but had been betrayed by a former vizier from another Hunza tribe.



Crossing a rope bridge, from The Making of a Frontier: Five Years' Experiences and Adventures in Gilgit, Hunza Nagar, Chitral and the Eastern Hindu-Kush *by Colonel Algernon Durand, C.B., C.I.E., London, Edinburgh, Dublin and New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1899.*

Mohamed Nazim Khan, from Between the Oxus and the Indus *by Colonel R.C.F. Schomberg, London: Martin Hopkinson Ltd., 1935.*

I am still puzzled about how this multitude of little states became transformed into the seemingly homogeneous Northern Territories of Pakistan. I am told that a key element was the building of more roads through very difficult terrain. This helped security, trade and in due course a common system of administration. Separate cultures inevitably merged. The creation of the Gilgit scouts in 1913 will have helped, especially when, at the time of partition, the young British commander ensured adherence to Pakistan. I haven't discovered how many of the local languages have survived. Islam has sadly brought most music to a stop.

Now, gaps to be filled. My first of these articles about my books on Afghanistan was kindly incorporated into *Indiran*, the newsletter of the Ancient India and Iran Trust, of which I am trustee (issue 14, Winter 2020). It was made clear to me that space was limited. In the fourth paragraph I mentioned briefly the explorer William Moorcroft, looked up to by many others as a pioneer traveller in Central Asia. He merited more attention. Born in 1767 he qualified as a doctor and surgeon but was interested in veterinary work, especially for horses. He established a prosperous practice in Oxford Street, London and became Britain's first ever qualified vet (for which he had to study at an institute in Lyon). In 1808, aged 41, he accepted an invitation from the East India company in Calcutta to head their main stud near Patna, at a high salary that attracted jealousy. Plenty of good horses were necessary for the East India Company. Besides managing the stud and fighting with Calcutta for sufficient funds Moorcroft felt the need to travel widely to search for quality bloodstock. This gave him a taste for adventure. In 1811 he travelled to Lucknow and the Punjab. Later he penetrated the Himalayas to the borders of Tibet, confronted by the then hostile new Gurkha state, where he was at one point taken prisoner. In 1820 he crossed the mountains, further west, to Ladakh, where he stayed two years, not allowed by the Chinese to travel to Yarkand. He then had to take his large commercial caravan through Kashmir across the Punjab of a suspicious Ranjit Singh to Peshawar and Kabul. Welcomed by family members of Dost Mohammed Khan, who was away, he went north, becoming the first Englishman to see Bamian, where his signature survived in one of the caves. In Uzbek territory he had difficulty in escaping the clutches of the slave-dealer Murad Beg but eventually crossed the Oxus and made for the

Indian portrait, said to be of Moorcroft, from Beyond Bokhara: The Life of William Moorcroft, Asian Explorer and Pioneer Veterinary Surgeon, 1767–1825 *by Garry Alder, London: Century Publishing, 1985.*

legendary Bokhara. He was the first Briton to visit that city, well before Woolf and then Burnes, who made more of a song and dance about it. Everywhere he went Moorcroft reported about horse quality, other livestock and local agriculture as well as topography and customs of the people. Also about prospects for British trade and reports of Russian activity. In Bokhara he succeeded in charming the brutal Emir, performing requisite courtesies, and was given freedom to stay and make local friends. But he wasn't allowed to take away some very fine horses that he wanted, so, after disposing of his gifts and caravan products, he set off for home, exhausted. After all he was now 58, an age that most local people thought was extremely old. He died at Andkhoi in 1825 in northwest Afghanistan, probably from fever, having followed a tip about good horses there.

His admirable young deputy Trebeck brought the body back for burial at Balkh but fell ill himself and also died. There was no one to rescue their goods and papers, which were stolen, dispersed and lost. Moorcroft's journals and other items turned up later in different places and were not collated, nor recorded, for some time. It was not until the publication in 1985 of *Beyond Bokhara, The Life of William Moorcroft* by Dr Gerry Alder of Reading University, which brought the story together, that we could conclude that Moorcroft was one of the most remarkable British men ever to travel to unknown places. There is a tribute to Moorcroft 'the famous traveller' in a little pavilion in the Shalimar Gardens of Lahore, where he stayed on his Bokhara journey in 1820.

I should also have said something more about Josiah Harlan, the American adventurer mentioned in paragraph 5 of my first article in this series. My earlier books say little about him because I suspect people knew little. There seems to have been only one photograph of him, and no other image: that of a strong-looking man, over 6 feet tall with moustache, wrapped in a dark Afghan robe. He was probably the first American to visit Afghanistan, coming to love the country, though his motives at first seemed to be self-promotion and money.

Josiah Harlan, from Josiah the Great: The True Story of the Man Who Would be King *by Ben Macintyre, HarperCollins*, 2004.

The first book that I acquired about Harlan had not appeared until 1939: *Central Asia: Personal Narrative of General Josiah Harlan 1823–1841*, edited by Frank Ross. It was published by Luzac and Co, another of the Oriental bookshops near the British Museum. It contained extracts of a book that Harlan had written after his return to the United States. There was material about the Uzbeks and, in more useful detail, about the Hazaras, but the rather turgid style, with long paragraphs, didn't make for easy reading. There was practically nothing about the events in which Harlan had personally participated except that, after the British invasion leading to the first Anglo-Afghan war, he wrote: 'I made no effort to achieve a position in the court after the British entry.' Also, 'vain-glorious and arrogant the invaders plunged headstrong towards destruction'. In 2004 a friend gave me a copy of *Josiah the Great*, published that same year by HarperCollins, which I enjoyed but should have absorbed more carefully. It was written by the journalist and writer Ben Macintyre who had reported on Afghan events and become fascinated by the Harlan story, on which he did research. In an obscure American museum he had discovered the rest of the papers quoted by Ross and material that had been the basis for Harlan's autobiographical book *A Memoir of India and Afghanistan*, material that Macintyre turned into a credible account of Harlan's life.

He had been one of seven sons of a Quaker family from Philadelphia who spread round the world when their mother died. In India he had access to the books of one of his brothers and called himself a doctor. After a period serving the East India Company in Burma he went to Ludhiana, looking for adventures further west. He persuaded the former Afghan Amir, Shah Shuja, living there in luxurious exile, to let him lead a group of supporters to Kabul to test the climate for a change of Amir. The local British agent, Captain Wade, stayed neutral but added funds so Harlan could try and find out what had happened to Moorcroft. With little military experience, or command of Persian, Harlan's journey with a ragtag of armed followers round the south of the Sikh state was full of difficulties (Charles Masson was a fellow traveller for a period). When Harlan eventually got to Kabul Dost Mohammed received him kindly and asked about America. He was much more impressed by Dost Mohammed than he had expected.

Harlan started to learn about Afghanistan, survived a cholera epidemic and stayed for two winters before travelling to Lahore seeking an introduction to the all-powerful Ranjit Singh, who was known to employ foreigners. He took advantage of his medical experience, argued his case and eventually secured a lucrative post as Governor of Gujrat. Honoured by Shah Shuja, despite his lack of success, he nevertheless became

disillusioned with the former Amir's character and prospects. He fell out with Ranjit after asking an exorbitant amount for medical treatment and accepted an invitation from Dost Mohammed to be military adviser to his armed forces. He was delighted to be given the responsibility of leading an Afghan force, nominally under command of the Dost's son Akbar, to cross the Hindu Kush and establish firm Kabul control in Afghan Turkestan. He trained the troops himself, won a battle north of the mountains and then got on particularly well with a paramount Hazara chief who proposed creating him by treaty 'Prince of Eastern Khorasan', a distinction that Harlan would boast of.

In his engaging narrative Macintyre made much of Harlan's knowledge of classical history, comparing his exploits with those of Alexander the Great. This helped promotion of the Josiah book, as did his theory that Kipling's well known short story, 'The Man who would be King', was based on Harlan having been made a Prince of Ghor. I tend to think that G.S. Robertson's experience of living under the unknown Kafirs could have been a more likely inspiration. In any case the strength of Harlan's military expedition secured peaceful submission by Murad Beg and others in northern Afghanistan. He returned over the mountains with troops partly starving because it was the wrong time of the year, but back in Kabul thanks were limited because everyone was aware that a British army was on its way. Afghan troops mutinied and Dost Mohammed had no choice but to leave, with a handful of followers. After fruitless attempts to give advice to the incoming British Harlan left, or was thrown out.

He had accumulated plenty of funds. After visiting London and Moscow he bought a grand mansion in Philadelphia and settled down to write a book, on which he had started. It was good timing because there was much justified criticism of British Afghan policy. But Harlan tried to get too much off his chest. His book turned out to be an uncompromising diatribe against the British Empire and British presence in India, in such exaggerated and vituperative language that people thought that its author was unreliable and partly mad. The historian Kaye called the writer unscrupulous. *A Memoir of India and Afghanistan* was published in the US in 1842 and mostly ignored. Harlan didn't lose energy but achieved little in the rest of his life. He had never been tempted by Afghan girls nor, as a Quaker, by alcohol. He now found a wife and became devoted to a daughter Sarah. When the American Civil War broke out he supported the anti-slavery North and raised a unit under his name, which he managed badly. His men were brave and loyal but his officers felt treated like Afghans, and insulted. He tried without success to introduce Afghan camels, and later, Afghan grapes, to the US. He got into debt. He died in 1871 in San Francisco, where he had been working as a doctor, forgotten and unmourned.

There are a few other books written by people only briefly mentioned at the beginning of these papers. *A Personal Narrative of a Visit to Ghuzni, Kabul, and Afghanistan* was published by G.T. Vigne in 1843 by George Routledge. My second edition is a handsome little volume with clear print and useful illustrations 'from drawings made by the author on the spot'. There are portraits of Dost Mohammed Khan (in colour), his favourite son Akbar, and his illiterate half brother Nawab Jabbar Khan, who showed kindness to many visiting foreigners. Vigne was known for doing sketches wherever he went. This is a well written travel book with interesting material about Dost Mohammed and Ranjit Singh (the latter's court formal, while the former's was very informal). As well as

Drawings of Nawab Jabbar Khan (below) and Mohammed Akbar Khan (above right), from A Personal Narrative of a Visit to Ghuzni, Kabul, and Afghanistan and of a Residence at the Court of Dost Mohamed: with Notices of Runjit Sing, Khiva, and the Russian Expedition *by G.T. Vigne, Esq. F.G.S., London: George Routledge.*

Shah Shuja he met in Ludhiana Shuja's blind brother, Zaman. He had plenty of contacts with Masson about coins. He learned little from a meeting with one of Moorcroft's servants. Material about the Kirghiz at the end of the book is less interesting.

For completeness I should say something more about the jewel in my collection of books about Afghanistan: *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* by the Hon Mountstuart Elphinstone, Resident at Poona, published by Longman, Murree and others in 1815. This may be a first edition, in good condition with what looks like a more recent hard cover. It is a major work of 675 pages with colour illustrations of Afghans, including some of the great Officers of State in traditional clothes. Elphinstone was attempting to record all the information that he could find about Afghanistan from a variety of sources. There is an introduction of 82 pages about his journey to the Amir's summer capital of Peshawar, shortly to fall to the Sikhs, and the splendid ceremonies with which he was welcomed.

The volume is then divided into five books. The first is a physical description of mountains, rivers, agriculture etc. The large map is confusing but the smaller map on page 83 is interesting. Afghanistan includes Kashmir and much of the Punjab down the Indus as far as Shikarpur and Bikaneer. Badakashan and the area occupied by Kafirs is not included. Book II is about Afghans and their way of life. They were considered crude by the Persians but

The Umla Baushee in his clothes of office (left) and a Durrani villager with his arms (right), from An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul, and its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary, and India; Comprising a View of the Afghan Nation, and A History of the Dooraunee Monarchy *by the Hon. Mountstuart Elphinstone, London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, and J. Murray, 1815.*

were mainly 'honest, straight forward and interested in the world outside,' whereas 'the Persians are too full of themselves to be curious about other nations'. When Elphinstone told an old Afghan that his country seemed full of violence and disturbances, he replied 'We are content with discord, we are content with alarms, we are content with blood. But we will never be content with a master.' Book III is about the numerous tribes of which the royal Durranis, the Ghilzais and Yusufzais are prominent. Book IV covers provinces. Little about antiquities but Herat is described as one of the most ancient and most renowned of all the cities of the east. The last section is an attempt to describe how the government works, heavily dependent on the King himself, advised by the Grand Vizier, normally from a different tribe. The recent appointment of a Saddozai vizier had been contentious. Officials in the large Court dealt with finance, administration, defence, religion and other issues.

The first appendix is the history of Afghanistan since the beginning of the Durrani monarchy. The second is about neighbouring countries, mostly about the Caufirs (Kafirs) based on information gleaned in the Peshawar area. Points noted: Kafirs had no name for their own nation. Their chief God was called 'Imra' (as Robertson later reported). They erected wooden idols of their great men. They counted in scores, while Muslims counted in hundreds. Many had finely sculpted faces with fair skin but 'the derivation of the language seemed fatal to the theory that they were descended from the Greeks'. Entertaining others was counted a great virtue (which was true). They washed their hands before eating and said some kind of grace. They drank wine to excess in silver cups (when I was in Nuristan we sought in vain for silver cups!) Their favourite amusement was dancing. For dress reasons and habit they could not sit on the ground like other Asiatics – they needed to stretch their legs out. I remember from my time that Nuristanis liked to sit on chairs, benches or stools. This is also mentioned in a dense 100-page compendium of Robertson's information about the Kafirs, perhaps written for the British government, just called *Kafiristan*, which I seem to have bought from a publisher (Sasor), dated 1982. Finally Elphinstone reports that the Kafirs were very hospitable but loved killing Muslims. For many years people interested in Afghanistan were influenced by this book, with all its merits and defects.

Finally, I must report on the most important book not yet mentioned, although often quoted by others: *Tribes of the Hindoo Koosh* by John Biddulph. I thought that I had purchased a copy but for some reason had lost it. All I had in fact was a cheap paper copy marked 'reprinted' by Indus Publications, Karachi, dated 1977 – found at the back of one of my bottom shelves. It includes a 'preface to the 1971 edition, by Karl Gratzl'. The date of the original book is nowhere mentioned but a separate bibliography suggests that it was 1880, printed in Calcutta. The preface gives an account of Biddulph's life: Born in 1840, Westminster School and tutored in Germany. In the Indian army he won a 'Mutiny Medal' for service at Oudh, was ADC to the viceroy and on special duty in Yarkand, the Wakhan and Gilgit, then Political Agent in other places. He was known for having a good collection of Indian curios, coins and ancient weapons and died in England in 1921. His book contains an astonishing amount of scholastic detail which I can't have examined before and can't cope with now. I can hardly believe it was produced by one man.

This was the main book using the word Dardistan, coined by a German colleague, to refer to the area between Afghanistan and Kashmir covered by Schomberg and in my 'Books No.7'. It has dubious scholarly authenticity suggesting that Dard tribes, Dard languages etc. had much in common when there was wide variety. The word was not used by the tribes themselves. As a scholar Biddulph had high regard for two predecessors: geologist Frederick Drew and the British commissioner in Ladakh, Robert Shaw (the latter was uncle of Francis Younghusband). His text includes extensive genealogies of Chitral, Hunza, Nager and Punyal ruling families. Among material on religions he reports that the unusual Sunni sect espoused in Hunza, called the Maulai, were followers of the Aga Khan. (At a Pakistan Society dinner some years ago I was privileged to be sitting next to the current Aga Khan, who told me that the number of his adherents in Central Asia had been growing considerably.) Biddulph wrote that that traces of most world religions could be found in the area that he was writing about. Islam was dominant but violence was rare. For example there was tolerance and intermarriage between Sunnis and Shias. Biddulph's detailed examination of numerous local languages included grammar and vocabularies. Prominent were Shina, in the Indus valley and up to Gilgit, Khowar in Chitral and Boorishki (what is normally now called Borushashki) in Hunza, Nagar and Yasin. I was a little surprised that Wakhi, used north of Hunza and in the Wakhan Valley was barely mentioned.

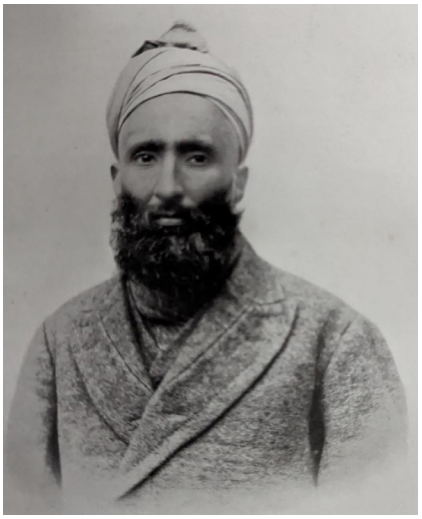
There is a superfluity of material on tribes, castes and customs. I noticed that Biddulph says that polo is everywhere played in Dardistan, but not in Badakshan, where the favourite sport is 'bozkeshi'. When I was first in Afghanistan in 1959 buzkeshi, a wild dramatically exciting game between groups of Uzbek and Turcoman mounted horsemen, with no holds barred, had been developed south of the Hindu Kush and was almost becoming a national sport. This involved picking from the saddle the dead body of a calf or goat (buz means goat) and carrying it to a target area. It even became practised later by Afghan refugees in Lahore and Peshawar – see page 39 of my diplomatic book of memoirs *Envoy*, published in 2014. I have a rare little book by an American diplomat G. Whitney Azoy, published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 1982, called *Buzkeshi*. He doesn't attempt a history of the sport, only assuming that it was practised by nomadic Turkic tribes. Biddulph also writes, of course, about dancing, including sword dancing, which I saw for myself in Chitral and Nuristan. Information about Kafirs came from individuals Biddulph met while visiting Chitral. Readers will pick up other points of interest. In one phrase he comments that the people of the area are 'a decadent race, doomed to be absorbed'.

I have included in these papers a few more recently published books, when they make sense of my older ones. A good example is *The Sword of Persia*, the story of the life of Nader Shah by my friend and former diplomat, Michael Axworthy, sadly no longer with us, published by I.B. Tauris in 2006. When I wrote to him that I had read the William Jones book (described in part 7 of this series) he replied that that had been a fairly meagre summary of Jones' full translation of a history of Nader Shah in Persian by the Shah's former chief secretary and official historian, Mirza Mehdi Asterabadi (clearly the eastern manuscript referred to by Jones). Axworthy's comprehensive book makes more of the irrational temperamental cruelty exhibited by the Shah at the end of his life, making the case for assassination more understandable. The prime mover nephew was the son of Nader's favourite brother Ibrahim, who had been killed while working for him in the Caucasus. Analysis of the possible reasons for Nader Shah's death reads like a detective story.

While on this subject please allow me to say something more about the Shah's unassailable fortress and headquarters north of Meshed, Kalat-i-Nadiri. Not a castle but a high-level plateau containing two villages and fortifications completely surrounded by 1000 ft high precipitous rock walls with few points of access, easily blocked. This place has always fascinated me since I read about it on pages 125–135 of the young Curzon's monumental history of 'Persia', mentioned in Books No. 6. Curzon was frustrated because not of being allowed to visit. The journalist O'Donovan seemed to have little problem passing through on his way to Merv, staying with the local Khan, though he felt he was being watched (I managed to purchase the two, rather ugly, volumes of O'Donovan's full 'Merv Oasis' story, but they didn't add much to my earlier summary volume – see my Books No. 3 paper). I wanted to visit myself when I was driving my Land Rover in Khorasan in 1958 but I was discouraged by the authorities for 'security reasons'. No one I know has actually been to Kalat-i-Nadiri. I should love to talk to anyone who has seen the place. Axworthy says that it is surprising how little interest has been taken in Nader Shah by British scholars and historians, perhaps not to distract attention from the so-called achievements of the British in India.

Readers will have noticed that in these papers I have talked about events and individuals relating to Afghanistan or areas influenced by Afghanistan, not covering explorers who ventured further east to Tibet or to cities part of China such as Yarkand and Kashgar. These are fields of study outside my personal experience. This is why I felt no need to mention the great traveller and archaeologist Sir Aurel Stein, famous for making many visits to China between 1906 and 1930, where he discovered paintings and manuscripts key to understanding of the Silk Road. Rather to my disappointment, however, because this paper is already too long, the more I got to know about Stein I found he couldn't be ignored. He did notable work also in Iran, Baluchistan and areas of India now part of Pakistan. The bases for his expeditions were often Peshawar or Kashmir. He followed Alexander the Great's routes avidly. I have a 1st edition of his book *Alexander's Track to the Indus*, mainly about his travels in Swat where he got on well with the founder of the state, and grandson of the Akund, Miangul Badshah Sahib. The latter was then ruling Swat, firmly and wisely. On my own first visit to Swat in 1967 I was privileged to be taken to meet him, at the end of his life, by my friend, his grandson. He had fought and killed his enemies, including many of his relatives, to achieve control, had handed over to his son, and was studying holy books in retirement. I was given a copy of the translation of his autobiography, where I spotted

A game of buzkeshi, from The Horsemen of Afghanistan *by Roland Michaud and Sabrina Michaud, London, Thames and Hudson, 1988.*

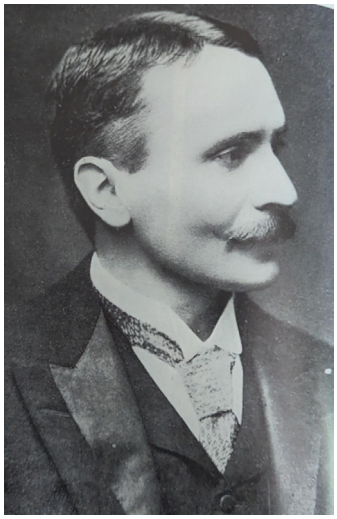


Miangul Abdul Wahab Gul-Shahzada Sahib, ruler of Swat, from On Alexander's Track to the Indus: Personal Narrative of Explorations on the North-West Frontier of India Carried Out Under the Orders of H.M. Indian Governemnet by Sir Aurel Stein, K.C.I.E., *London: Macmillan and Co.: 1929.*

that as a child he said he had heard stories of the 'despotic rule' of the Amir Abdur Rahman of Afghanistan.

Aurel Stein, named after the Roman Emperor considered to have been a philosopher, was born in Budapest in 1862 in a Jewish family – note coincidence with the linguist traveller Arminius Vambrey (see Books No. 3). He never married, took British nationality and was knighted (KCIE) in 1912 when famous for his Chinese expeditions. The one place where he was keen to excavate, but never got permission, was Afghanistan. Ironically he died and was buried in Kabul in a final fruitless attempt, during the Second World War.

Finally, if I dare say this, I must apologise for the way that this material, in eight papers, which I shall now call my Afghan Octet, is not always set out chronologically and has not everywhere been scholarly checked, in the time at my disposal. This has not only been an attempt to use my books to review the historical record but the story of my personal search for relevant points, taking advantage of my service in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, and the fact that I have seen many of the places mentioned at first hand. I do hope that others will forgive my mistakes and find what I have discovered and written interesting.



Aurel Stein shortly before he set out on his second expedition to the Taklamakan Desert, from Aurel Stein: Pioneer of the Silk Road *by Annabel Walker, London: John Murray, 1995.*

Notes: Spelling of names and some other local words varies in different books and articles. I have tried to be consistent throughout the papers, for example keeping Dost Mohammed Khan for the Afghan Amir. I am grateful to Ushnish Sengupta and Peter Barbor for typing and general assistance and especially to Jinya Mizuno, without whom the octet would never have been finished.

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