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Martin J . Bayly
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Introduction

In 1783 a servant of the East India Company, George Forster, journeyed across Afghanistan on his way from Bengal to England. Forster's trip was the first of many to follow as a succession of British and European explorers ventured across the 'land of the Afghans', recording their travels and contributing to a vision of Afghanistan that would provide the intellectual universe upon which British officials would draw to guide their policy decisions throughout the nineteenth century.[1] Collectively, these works and the travels they narrated provide the overture to more than a century of direct, if spasmodic, British involvement with its frontier in India. In Afghanistan, this encounter would be defined by periodic bouts of engagement and retrenchment, each time warping and forcing a reappraisal of such works as part of a pool of understanding, a pool that was gradually expanded but frequently retrograde in its character. Like waves crashing on the shore, British engagement in Afghanistan advanced and retreated and twice during the nineteenth century resulted in war.[2]

What follows is an attempt to provide a cultural history of Anglo-Afghan diplomatic relations between 1808 and 1878. I use this terminology advisedly. The aim here is not to essentialize culture, or to reduce it to an explanatory variable, but rather to explore the manner in which British perceptions of Afghanistan provided the understandings that guided them to policy decisions. These understandings, I argue, did not consist purely of ideas driven by strategic logic. Throughout the nineteenth century, building on the initial works of

[1] For a list of these individuals, see Appendices 3 and 4.
[2] The First Anglo-Afghan War took place between 1838 and 1842 (though troops did not cross into Afghanistan till 1839), and the Second Anglo-Afghan War occurred between 1878 and 1880. The First Anglo-Afghan War was effectively two invasions. The British were forced to withdraw in 1841 and, in response to this heavy defeat, sent forth an 'army of retribution' that finally withdrew in 1842. Some accounts thus refer to the Anglo-Afghan 'wars' when describing what is more commonly known as the First Anglo-Afghan War.

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European travellers, the British developed, refined, and acted upon an amorphous and contested 'idea' of Afghanistan, one that was more than simply the function of great power geopolitics. The sources informing this imagined entity were cultural, intellectual, moral, political, and social-scientific, as much as they were emotional. It was an idea, or collection of ideas, that would evolve and become trammelled by events and ultimately leave a legacy that persists to this day.

This is a story that has two interwoven aspects: one based on knowledge and the other based on sentiment. These two aspects are woven through the three themes guiding the book, namely, 'knowledge', 'policy', and 'exception'. The first – Part I – is the story of the formation and evolution of a colonial knowledge community. This story begins in Chapter 1 and focuses on the build-up of this knowledge prior to the First Anglo-Afghan War. It is a study of the emergence of a body of experts and their works and how this knowledge became translated into policy and practice. This translation into policy is the subject of Part II, which looks at how this knowledge was applied in the policies that led to the First Anglo-Afghan War. As such, it is argued, the 'idea of Afghanistan' had a demonstrable impact on the manner in which Britain engaged with the country itself. However, the story is not one of straightforward translation from knowledge to practice. In their quest to understand, influence, and ultimately subjugate the Afghan strategic space to their own ends, British officials were forced to distil and codify this growing body of work into a digestible abstracted form. This process not only elided the complexities of the Afghan political community but also forced moments of 'closure'[3] around key definitions and representations as complex understandings were simplified for policy ingestion. As such, this is as much the story of 'unlearning' Afghanistan as it is story of 'learning' about the country. This was a process of converting what Bernard Cohn has described as the investigative modalities[4] of colonial knowledge into a 'policy science for the

[3] Jan Golinski, *Making Natural Knowledge: Constructivism and the History of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[4] As Cohn describes it, 'An investigative modality includes the definition of a body of information that is needed, the procedures by which appropriate knowledge is gathered, its ordering and classification, and then how it is transformed into usable forms such as published reports, statistical returns, histories, gazetteers, legal codes, and encyclopedias.' Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 5.

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powerful'.[5] Afghanistan thus became beholden to a concentrated and partial knowledge order, one that shut down latitude in interpretation and became hostage to historical fortune. In effect, then, this is the story of how a colonial state both sees and does not see, a process which as Priya Satia has observed is 'intricately bound up with cultural history'.[6]

Whilst this process of closure rigidified the parameters within which Afghanistan was imagined, the process of imagining did not stop, as Part III – on 'exception' – reveals. Following the First Anglo-Afghan War, the idea of Afghanistan took on new forms and acquired new meanings. During this period we witness a greater role for the second aspect to this story, one that is more emotional, sentimental, and imaginative in its form. It is the story of the partial and spasmodic investigation of a space that both enchanted and terrified. Imagining a strategic space to which they had precious little access, the British relied on a cocktail of representational criteria. They increasingly viewed Afghanistan as a security threat not only due to fears of Russian activity but also due to their own sense of cognitive and ontological unease with a space that became subsumed under a particular 'violent geography'[7] and a people who frequently fell under the rubric of 'tribals', 'fanatics', 'intriguers', and 'militants'. Following the Anglo-Afghan War, Afghanistan was effectively closed off for European explorers and officials and became defined by a peculiar form of imagined knowledge: a cartography of danger and exclusion, as Afghan society began to be viewed through British encounters with the communities on the north-west frontier of India.

Meanwhile, the 'idea of Afghanistan' was swept up into a wider logic of imperial thought. Afghanistan's exclusion from empire became justified not simply on normative grounds but also on legal grounds as

[5] Tarak Barkawi, 'Empire and Order in International Relations and Security Studies', in Robert A. Denemark (ed.), *The International Studies Encyclopedia*, vol. III (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 1360.

[6] Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

[7] Derek Gregory and Allan Pred (eds.), *Violent Geographies: Fear, Terror, and Political Violence* (Oxford: Routledge, 2007); Martin J. Bayly, 'Imperial Ontological (In)security: "Buffer States", International Relations and the Case of Anglo-Afghan Relations, 1808–1878', *European Journal of International Relations*, 21/4 (2015), 816–40.

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colonial knowledge was used to sustain the portrayal of an 'uncivilized', 'outlaw state',[8] one beyond the pale of standard diplomatic intercourse. At the same time, the bureaucratizing processes that paralleled an increasingly assertive military presence on the frontier provided a panacea to this state of unknowing, reducing Afghanistan to a problem of military science. Whereas previously the idea of Afghanistan was an idea dominated by the works of European explorers and 'company men', a new 'epistemic community' began to capture the definition of the problem. This capture was incomplete, however. Although the period is frequently described in terms of competing notions of imperial defence, there was nuance within this debate. What is more, there were those voices that continued to advocate a policy of political engagement, once more activating the cultural canon of European Afghanistan 'expertise'.

Partly as a reflection of the influence on British thinking of their own culturally contingent intellectual fashions and partly due to the simple lack of 'time on the ground', the British were often apt to see Afghans and Afghanistan through a glass darkly. This was in loosely defined abstract terms based on often outdated, patchy empirics, through unrefined stereotypes that barely pretended to be based on anything more than conjecture, or through sterile concepts such as 'scientific' theories relating to imperial defence. As such, the two aspects of this story, which can be described as the academic and the imaginative (to borrow from Said),[9] never travelled alone. Whilst one occasionally took precedence over the other, in many ways they were two sides of the same coin, mutually sustaining, feeding off, and interacting with each other.

The British Empire's periodic forays into Afghanistan rendered their encounters with the country both partial and spasmodic. Each intervention brought with it a scramble for knowledge and information, but a scramble inevitably dominated by the prevailing policy themes of the day. Whenever the creaking information networks and knowledge

[8] Gerrit Gong, *The Standard of 'Civilization' in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Gerry Simpson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[9] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), 2. Said identifies a third form of 'Orientalism', that of the 'corporate institution for dealing with the Orient' (Said, *Orientalism*, 2). This institution forms the principal subject of his study. As I outline in further detail in Chapter 1, this work does not take an avowedly Saidian approach, but I do borrow from his work.

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communities were put into action, they were immediately infected by the sclerotic tendencies of a policy centre urging their own definition of the problem on their agents. This was not so much 'covert'[10] or 'informal' empire[11] as incompetent or tendentious empire. When the next intervention came along, as it did thirty-six years after the end of the First Anglo-Afghan War, the Afghan context had changed radically, whilst the colonial lens had become further tainted by the legacy of this long period of partial engagement. In their quest to render Afghanistan legible, the British continually forgot their own authorship of the world.[12]

This book is not simply a study of Anglo-Afghan relations in the nineteenth century, but it is an attempt to explore the manner in which states and their agencies attempt to comprehend regions that they consider to be unfamiliar, threatening, or incomprehensible. It is a study into the processes through which that considered 'strange' is rendered 'familiar'. It is argued that these processes are partly cultural phenomena concerning knowledge, society, and the sociology of knowledge. As such, this book places us not only on the frontiers of colonial imagination but also on the frontiers of thought in the International Relations (IR) discipline. It challenges comfortable assumptions pertaining to notions of 'state', 'sovereignty', 'territory', and 'identity', considering how this terminology may be contingent on a social, historical, and political context rather than reducible to generic abstracted ideal-types. As such, this book also challenges the comfortable position that IR has tended to take with respect to its use of history – particularly imperial history. What Jonathan B. Isacoff terms the 'historical imagination' of IR[13] has often been driven by the IR discipline itself rather than by any attempt to consider its correspondence to historical reality. In taking a more questioning attitude towards that discipline and taking a more inclusive approach to the

[10] Satia, *Spies in Arabia*.
[11] C. R. Fay, 'The Movement towards Free Trade, 1820–1853', in J. Holland et al. (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the British Empire*, Volume II: *The Growth of the New Empire 1783–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 399.
[12] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 86.
[13] Jonathan B. Isacoff, 'On the Historical Imagination of International Relations: The Case for a "Deweyan Reconstruction"', *Millennieum*, 31/3 (2002), 603–26.

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history upon which the discipline is built, this book aims to explore new frontiers.

Imagining Afghanistan: the lasting influence of image, narrative, and myth

All geographical spaces must acquire an attached meaning structure. Spaces can rarely simply 'be'; they must represent something or a collection of things. All geographies are thus to an extent 'imagined', and such imaginings are, generally speaking, subjective appraisals. Geopolitics is in part the study of the 'spatialization' of international politics 'in such a way as to represent a "world" characterized by particular types of places, peoples and dramas', a process frequently carried out by 'core powers or hegemonic states'.[14] As part of this spatialization, there is, John Agnew notes, a tendency to essentialize, exoticize, and totalize geographical space.[15] In the modern setting such tendencies have given rise to what Simon Dalby terms 'tabloid realism', the 'presentation of the world in terms of dangerous places and the ever-present threat of violence'.[16] This 'cartography of danger', he argues, has been particularly associated with the US War on Terror. Imagined geographies often cluster around binary narratives of 'our' territory and 'theirs', often springing from a particular 'heartland' or 'homeland' mentality.[17] Unsurprisingly, such narratives are particularly prevalent when it comes to frontiers – areas that have historically preoccupied empires. As Manan Ahmed observes, '[t]o the centre of any empire the frontier is a site of anxiety, of potential harm, of barbarians who could be marching towards the gate.'[18] Given what

[14] Gearóid Ó Tuathail and John Agnew, 'Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy', *Political Geography*, 11/2 (1992), 192; Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics* (London: Routledge, 1996).

[15] John Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics*, Second Edition (London: Routledge, 1998), 36.

[16] Simon Dalby, 'The Pentagon's New Imperial Cartography: Tabloid Realism and the War on Terror', in Gregory and Pred (eds.), *Violent Geographies*, 255–72; Malcolm Anderson, *Frontiers: Territory and State Formation in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 295–308.

[17] Matthew Farish, 'Targeting the Inner Landscape', in Gregory and Pred (eds.), *Violent Geographies*, 255–72; Anderson, *Frontiers*.

[18] Manan Ahmed, 'Adam's Mirror: The Frontier in the Imperial Imagination', *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLVI/13 (2001), 60. See also Anderson, *Frontiers*.

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critical geopolitics and frontier studies suggest, it is perhaps equally unsurprising that Afghanistan is often subject to particular narrative renderings. Afghanistan is frequently cast as a 'violent geography', a 'black world'[19] caught between manifest destiny and oblivion; paradoxically at the confluence of the 'knowable' – of civilizations, empires, nation-states, or societies – and yet resembling a land of the 'unknowable', of 'wild tribes', nefarious actors; a domain of rumour, intrigue, and violence.[20]

Such spaces have regularly found their way into popular culture. In literature, Rudyard Kipling famously alluded to the imperial anxiety that was directed towards India's north-western frontier in a number of his most famous novels and short stories, including *Kim, The Man Who Would Be King*, and *The Man Who Was*, each of which casts Afghanistan as an unknown – and to some extent unknowable – backwater, a domain of radical contingency and threatening agents. In Russian literature also, Leo Tolstoy's *Hadji Murad* tracks the nervous paranoia that meets the arrival of a Chechen fighter from one of the Russian empire's own frontier spaces, apparently wishing to defect to Russia. The Nobel Prize–winning author J. M. Coetzee's portrayal of imperial paranoia in *Waiting for the Barbarians* provides a chilling allegory on metropolitan fear of uprisings from the unknown wild beyond. James Michener's 1963 novel *Caravans* applies such thinking to Afghanistan, when an American damsel goes missing in Afghanistan and is recovered by a dashing American serviceman. The *New York Times* described it as '[a]n extraordinary novel' in which the 'mountains sing and the deserts writhe in a kind of spasmodic horror of deathlessness'. The *Minneapolis Tribune* hailed it as an 'imaginative journey to a barbarous land little changed in centuries'.[21] This denial of

[19] Trevor Paglen, 'Groom Lake and the Imperial Production of Nowhere', in Gregory and Pred (eds.), *Violent Geographies*, 237–54. Paglen refers to a secret weapons testing site in the Nevada desert, formerly an Indian reserve before being swallowed up by the advancing American frontier. As he describes it, this space remained 'a swath of uncharted land, a blank space on the map, a space in the crosshairs of manifest destiny, a space that stunk of death' (244). The description is reminiscent of the manner in which Afghanistan has occasionally been portrayed.

[20] See Manan Ahmed, 'Adam's Mirror: The Frontier in the Imperial Imagination', *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLVI/13 (2011), 60–5. See also Benjamin Hopkins and Magnus Marsden, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier* (London: Hurst, 2011).

[21] James A. Michener, *Caravans* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1963).

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historical progress, an equally popular trope in such representations, was famously and controversially reprised by former British Defence Secretary Liam Fox, who in 2010 described Afghanistan as a 'broken 13th century country'.[22] Such representations exhibit a powerful and enduring cultural presence partially reflected in a curious nostalgia for imperial derring-do during the 'great game' in Central Asia. Once again, popular culture has played its part as with the famously jingoistic exploits of the fictional anti-hero Captain Flashman, whose career begins in the First Anglo-Afghan War. Since 2001, the shelves of bookshops have groaned under the weight of new publications on Afghanistan, frequently alluding to its history as the venue of great power competition, imperial rivalries and intrigue, and a domain of violence, terrorism, and insurgency.

For the British in India, their century-long experience of policing the frontier from the annexation of the Punjab in 1849 to partition and Indian independence in 1947 perpetuated a certain frontier mentality. Indeed, it is arguably this prolonged British encounter with the 'wild tribes' of the frontier that promoted the most enduring, and most misleading, stereotypes of the Afghans.[23] Engaging with these groups prompted the emergence of new class of colonial hero – the man of the frontier – eulogized by luminaries such as Olaf Caroe and George Curzon, pushing into the vague borderlands of the colonial state,

[22] The comment unsurprisingly provoked a furious response from the Karzai administration. David Batty, 'Liam Fox Calls for Faster UK Troop Withdrawal from Afghanistan', *Guardian* (www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/may/22/liam-fox-troop-withdrawal-afghanistan, 22 May 2010); Tom Coghlan, 'Afghans Accuse Defence Secretary Liam Fox of Racism and Disrespect', *The Times* (www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article7134622.ece, 24 May 2010).

[23] Akbar S. Ahmed, 'An Aspect of the Colonial Encounter in the North-West Frontier Province', *Asian Affairs*, 9/2 (1978), 319–27; Mukulika Banerjee, *The Pathan Unarmed* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000); Charles Lindholm, 'Images of the Pathan: The Usefulness of Colonial Ethnography', *European Journal of Sociology*, 21/2 (1980), 350–61; Jon Anderson, 'Poetics and Politics in Ethnographic Texts: A View from the Colonial Ethnography of Afghanistan', in Richard Harvey Brown (ed.), *Writing the Social Text: Poetics and Politics in Social Science Discourse* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1992), 91–116; Hopkins and Marsden, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier*; Christine Noelle, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan: The Reign of Amir Dost Muhammad Khan (1826–1863)* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997), xv.

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seeking to tame the 'wild' Pathans.[24] Whilst these stereotypes and their progenitors have been well covered in the literature, less attention has been paid to the impact these imaginative and bureaucratic processes had on the manner in which British officials engaged with the government on the other side of the mountains in Kabul. The idea of Afghanistan became partially filtered through this volatile relationship, as improving relations with other regional political entities further cast Afghanistan in a relatively exceptional light.

In the contemporary setting, Afghanistan has once more acquired a particular image as a domain of violence and great power failure. Rory Stewart, drawing on his own experience as a European Afghanistan explorer turned policy advisor (turned Conservative MP), noted this trend in 2009 when he wrote, '[w]e are accustomed to seeing Afghans through bars, or smeared windows, or the sight of a rifle: turbaned men carrying rockets, praying in unison, or lying in pools of blood; boys squabbling in an empty swimming-pool; women in burn wards, or begging in *burqas*.'[25] Perhaps this is a perception that is beginning to change, but such representations are never far away. The process of international troop withdrawal in 2015 prompted a degree of soul-searching over the failings of America's 'longest war', as well as the international community's largest post–Cold War state-building project. As with previous periods of waning international presence in Afghanistan, there has been a temptation to reach back into history and find parallels or to look for excuses elsewhere.[26] Afghanistan has once again been defined in terms of its history as it arrives at a critical juncture. It is a key contention of this book that these representations have a history and, moreover, that they have at

[24] Ahmed, 'An Aspect of the Colonial Encounter in the North-West Frontier Province'; Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans: 550 B.C.–A.D. 1957* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 332–45; George N. Curzon, 'Text of the 1907 Romanes Lecture on the Subject of Frontiers' (www.dur.ac.uk/resources/ibru/resources/links/curzon.pdf).

[25] Rory Stewart, 'The Irresistible Illusion', *London Review of Books*, 31/13 (9 July 2009), 3–6. Available online: www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n13/rory-stewart/the-irresistible-illusion.

[26] For a similar observation and for an example, see Myra MacDonald, 'Do You Think Afghanistan Hasn't Changed Since 1842?', *Reuters* (http://blogs.reuters.com/pakistan/2012/03/20/do-you-think-afghanistan-hasnt-changed-since-1842/, 20 March 2012); The Editors, 'Despair and Necessity in Afghanistan', *The National Review* (www.nationalreview.com/articles/293834/despair-and-necessity-afghanistan-editors, 20 March 2012).

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times given licence to policy decisions and have been perpetuated by those policy decisions too. But accessing this first requires overcoming certain tendencies within parts of the existing literature.

Beyond the 'great game': recovering Afghanistan's imperial encounter

A key aim of this book is to recover Afghanistan's imperial encounter from what can be described as the oblivion of great power politics. Historical accounts have tended to prioritize Anglo-Russian rivalry and war, generally with the former leading to the latter. The key trope in this 'master narrative' is the overwhelming presence of the 'great game' thesis, one which prioritizes Anglo-Russian rivalry as an explanatory factor.[27] The aim of this work is not to wish away the history of this rivalry but rather to remove it from the centre of analysis. The problem here is not one of fact but of emphasis. The reasoning for this will be discussed, but in the first instance it is worth considering where the 'great game' narrative comes from and why it has proven so stubborn, particularly given that the term is practically non-existent in the archives.

The phrase 'great game' has been routinely deployed in key texts covering the history of Central Asia during the nineteenth century, the most recent and famous of which is probably Peter Hopkirk's work, *The Great Game*.[28] Hopkirk acquired the phrase himself from a succession of historians who have borrowed from two sources. The first was Rudyard Kipling, whose famous novel *Kim* immortalized the phrase in literary form, and the second was John Kaye, whose three-volume account of the First Anglo-Afghan War dominated the

[27] Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, 'Shah Shuja's "Hidden History" and Its Implications for the Historiography of Afghanistan', *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [online], (May 2012). Available online: http://samaj.revues.org/3384; Benjamin Hopkins, 'The Myth of the "Great Game": The Anglo-Sikh Alliance and Rivalry', in *Centre of South Asian Studies Occasional Paper*, No. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University of Press, 2004); James Hevia, *The Imperial Security State: British Colonial Knowledge and Empire-Building in Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 9.

[28] Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia* (London: John Murray, 2006). William Dalrymple also reprises the narrative in his recent work: William Dalrymple, *Return of a King* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

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