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J. A. Norris

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# THE FIRST AFGHAN WAR

## 1838-1842

BY

J. A. NORRIS



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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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*For Josephine*

## CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	<i>page xi</i>
Map	xii
Introduction	xiii
ANGLO-RUSSIAN RIVALRY TO 1830	
1 Early threats to the British Empire in India	3
2 Britain recognizes the Russian threat	18
BRITISH AIMS IN CENTRAL ASIA 1830-1838	
3 Wellington's administration and the master plan	35
4 Reconnaissance along the Indus	50
5 Auckland's first year in India	81
6 Negotiations in Teheran and Kabul	102
ADVANCE TO THE HINDU KUSH 1838-1839	
7 Auckland breaks with Dost Muhammad	137
8 British India prepares for war	174
9 The Home Government supports Auckland	207
10 The Army of the Indus	231
11 Marching to Kandahar	247
12 A king restored at Kabul	269
RETURN TO THE INDUS 1840-1842	
13 Victory and over-confidence	305
14 The mounting cost of intervention	337
15 Rising at Kabul	361

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-13096-7 - The First Afghan War 1838-1842  
J. A. Norris  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

### *Contents*

16	The Army of Retribution	<i>page</i> 391
17	Aftermath and epilogue	417
	<i>Appendixes</i>	445
	1. The Indian papers 1839 and 1859	
	2. General Napier's comments on the Kabul Insurrection	
	3. A Proclamation made at Simla, 1 October 1842	
	<i>Bibliography</i>	453
	<i>Notes</i>	457
	<i>Index</i>	483

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13096-7 - The First Afghan War 1838-1842

J. A. Norris

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## A NOTE ON NAMES

In the first half of the nineteenth century the English transliteration of personal and place names common in the East was far from standardized. In this work the author has in general used the modern spelling in his narrative, while retaining the old spelling in quotations from contemporary writings. He has, however, followed the old style in transliterating the name of the Maharajah of Lahore — ‘*Runjeet Singh*’. This spelling is a better guide to pronunciation than the more modern ‘Ranjit’. He has also favoured the form *Muhammad* whenever that name occurs in his narrative. In referring to Dost Muhammad Khan he follows an old practice by calling him sometimes the Dost (Friend) and sometimes the Emir (Commander or Prince). In the narrative Shah Shuja is sometimes ‘king’ and sometimes ‘shah’ but never ‘emir.’

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[More information](#)

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The author is particularly grateful to the India Office Librarian for lending him books published more than a century ago.

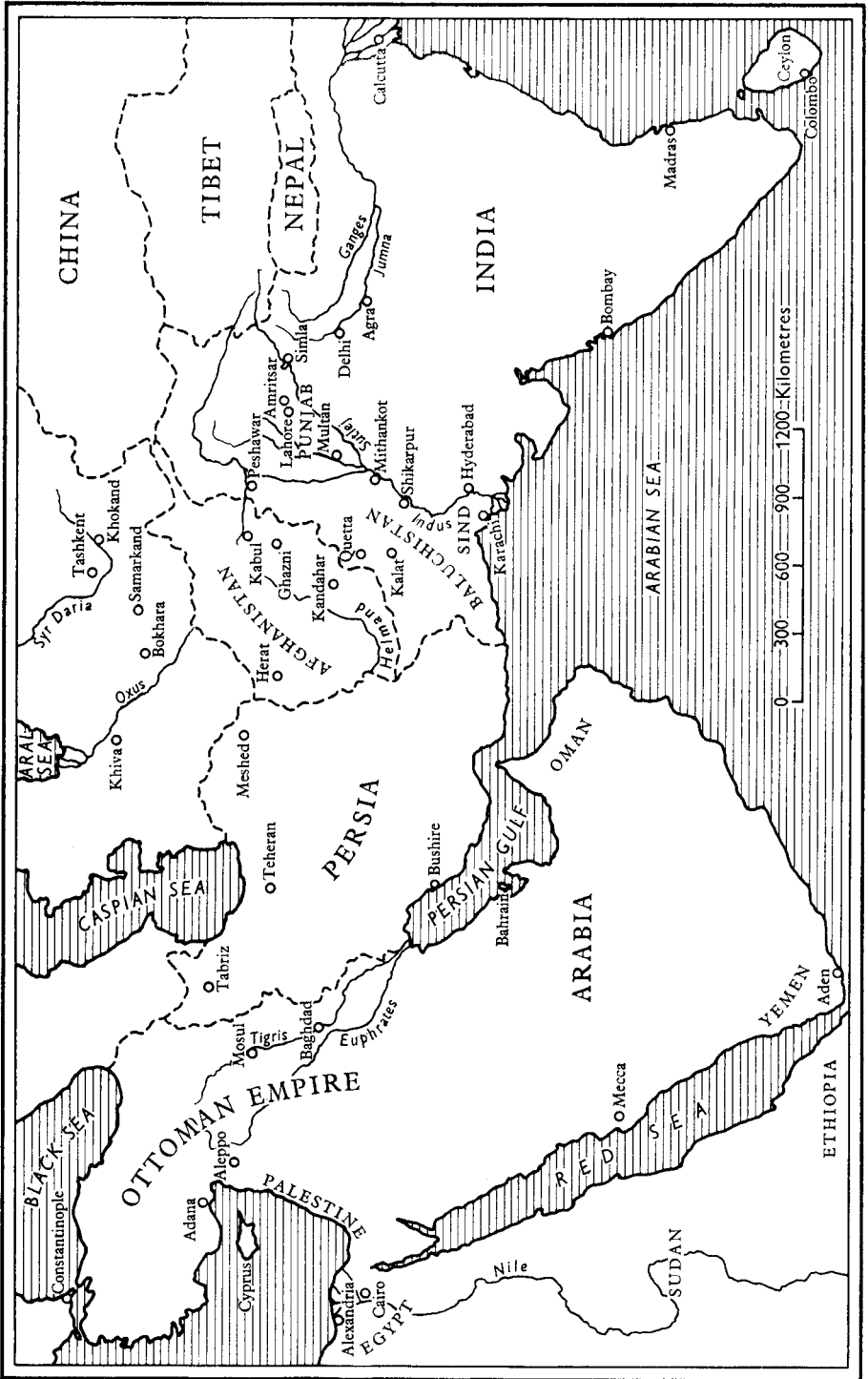
Research work done by Mr Robert A. Huttenback for his book on *British Relations with Sind, 1799-1843, An Anatomy of Imperialism* has lightened the author's task in more than one chapter. He wishes to acknowledge his debt to Mr Huttenback and the University of California Press.

Over a long period the author has owed much to his teachers, and particularly to the late Francis Lockwood, sometime headmaster of William Ellis School, to Christopher Rieu, and to Dr T. R. Henn, Fellow of St Catharine's College, Cambridge. If this book shows any understanding of military matters the credit is due to his association with the Territorial Battalion of the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment.

To his wife the author owes the inspiration and encouragement which made this book possible.



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[More information](#)



## INTRODUCTION

The events known in history as the First Afghan War have had many reporters, but few of them appear to have examined the voluminous original sources in detail. Some have long remained content to reproduce the contemporary judgements and partisan comments of nineteenth-century writers without discrimination. To a very large extent this is the influence of Sir John William Kaye's long reign as an unchallenged historian of Victorian India. His books are solid monuments, not unlike the statue of Sir Charles Napier in Trafalgar Square. One does not lightly question the skill of the sculptor in catching a likeness. The passer-by does not, unless he has a particular interest in the subject, question the values of the men who placed Napier next to Nelson in a gallery of heroes. Nevertheless, it becomes necessary from time to time to look with the eye of irreverence at the work of established authorities. Sir John William Kaye was a man of strong opinions and prejudices, ever ready with a moral judgement and a fine rhetorical flourish to arguments which were often based on incomplete or circumstantial evidence. His honesty is not in question, and the author of this work has the greatest respect for Kaye's scholarship and integrity, but it is surely time at last to re-examine the evidence calmly, taking into account a mass of evidence to which Kaye can never have had access. It is also time to replace the episode in its proper context. The third edition of the *Oxford History of India* provides a signpost:

It is in the interaction of British policy towards Russia in the Near and Middle East that the explanation of much that happened in the two Afghan Wars is to be found. . . Events in one theatre cannot therefore be understood without reference to events in the other; the Afghan Wars were essentially a part of the general Eastern Question.<sup>1</sup>

Few have shown the Afghan War of 1838 in that light. Sir Llewellyn Woodward's recent volume<sup>2</sup> in the *Oxford History of England*, 'The Age of Reform', includes a long section on British policy in the Near East from 1827 to 1841, without once mentioning Afghanistan. He gives seven lines to the question of Cabinet responsibility for the First Afghan War. *The Cambridge History of British Foreign Policy* sees the connexion between British policy in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13096-7 - The First Afghan War 1838-1842

J. A. Norris

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

### *Introduction*

the Ottoman Empire and British policy in Persia and Afghanistan, but gives only a dozen pages to the First Afghan War.<sup>3</sup> The same strange separatism is apparent in Sir Charles Webster's study of Palmerston's Foreign Policy. Having accepted that Palmerston was right about Russian ambitions in Central Asia, and that British aims in the First Afghan War were justifiable, Sir Charles Webster says:

Whether the same objectives could have been obtained with less bloodshed and intrigue is a question of Indian strategy and politics, and not of British foreign policy.<sup>4</sup>

W. A. J. Archbold, author of the account given in the *Cambridge History of the British Empire*, drew a sketch for the standard work that could have been written in 1929. But it was only a sketch, revealing to the disciples of Kaye and Durand that the last word had by no means been spoken in 1851. One of the few things on which the author finds it possible wholeheartedly to agree with the authors of *The Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India*, on the other hand, is their statement that 'the writing of Indian history is over-run with cant'.<sup>5</sup> Kaye started a fashion for comment on the First Afghan War, and many have copied him since he wrote:

Throughout the entire period of British connection with Afghanistan, a strange moral blindness clouded the vision of our statesmen: they saw only the natural, the inevitable results of their own measures, and forgot that those measures were the dragon's teeth from which sprung up the armed men.<sup>6</sup>

On the shelf of the author's local public library there is a much borrowed work on the history of the British Army. It is not the standard work by Sir John Fortescue, but a more modest 'Short History' by Captain Eric Sheppard of the Royal Tank Corps, written in 1925. He gives an account of the First Afghan War, starting with a piece of rhetoric worthy of Kaye himself:

We now come to one of the darkest chapters in our history—one of the few, indeed almost the only one, which has to tell not only of defeat but of disgrace, of shame as well as of sorrow. For once our arms were employed in a cause which has met with universal condemnation at the hands of posterity, and in the course of an unjust aggression met with condign defeat; and though our ruined prestige was later in some

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J. A. Norris

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

measure repaired, the objects for which we took up arms were in the ultimate outcome left unattained. This ill-conceived and ill-starred campaign is known to history as the First Afghan War.<sup>7</sup>

Sir John Fortescue called it ‘the insane enterprise which is known as the First Afghan War’.<sup>8</sup> Archbold’s calmer verdict was that the invasion of Afghanistan was ‘a terrible mistake’,<sup>9</sup> while L. J. Trotter, the author of a biography of Lord Auckland, called that Governor’s policy a blunder and a crime.<sup>10</sup> And just as the policy has met with little but criticism, the chief actors have been pelted with abuse for the last one hundred and twenty years. Auckland has been accused of ‘straightforward wickedness’,<sup>11</sup> of being a ‘conscientious mediocrity’,<sup>12</sup> of being a ‘bumbling’<sup>13</sup> weakling without a settled policy of his own. Poor Ellenborough, the ‘wild elephant’<sup>14</sup> of Westminster and Calcutta, was blamed and ridiculed even by his own Tory colleagues, the duke of Wellington and a few others excepted. He has been written down as a vain and bullying pseudo-Napoleon, and as one who lost his nerve at a moment of crisis in April 1842. The talented and likable Alexander Burnes and the ‘spunky’<sup>15</sup> and always optimistic William Hay Macnaghten have also suffered at the hands of historians. Neither lived to tell his own tale, and Burnes in particular has suffered because of the spiteful innuendoes of Charles Masson, a traveller and archaeologist who kept the Bengal government supplied with Kabul rumours until Burnes came on the scene and made him redundant in September 1837.<sup>16</sup> Those who have accepted Masson’s version of Burnes as a licentious lightweight have all ignored the wise advice given by George Buist, a great editor of the *Bombay Times* and a model for journalists in any age. He wrote: ‘In quoting Mr Masson on this subject [the activities of the Russian agent Vitkievitch in Kabul] we are bound to state, that whatever he writes in reference to Captain Burnes bears an appearance in the last degree suspicious.’<sup>17</sup>

It is the author’s belief that historians have not yet done justice to those who were responsible for this first war of Victoria’s reign. There is no shortage of source material in English, but some scholars seem only to have skimmed the surface. The author also believes that the study of the origins, events, and outcome of the First Afghan War can teach valuable lessons about the nature of imperialism, the growth of Asian nationalism, the realities of power politics, and the British national character. It is certainly not his

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

intention to 'whitewash' what was unworthy in the record of British involvement in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, he hopes that the result of his studies will throw light into some hitherto murky corners of British imperial history, and he would be content if his work served a purpose similar to that of the restorer of an old painting, for there is a very thick layer of dirt and varnish on the generally accepted picture of the First Afghan War.