Taming the Imperial Imagination marks a novel intervention into the debate on empire and International Relations and offers a new perspective on nineteenth-century Anglo-Afghan relations. Martin Bayly shows how, throughout the nineteenth century, the British Empire in India sought to understand and control its peripheries through the use of colonial knowledge. Addressing the fundamental question of what Afghanistan itself meant to the British at the time, he draws on extensive archival research to show how knowledge of Afghanistan was built, refined, and warped by an evolving colonial state. This knowledge informed policy choices and cast Afghanistan in a separate legal and normative universe. Beginning with the disorganized exploits of nineteenth-century explorers and ending with the cold strategic logic of the militarized ‘scientific frontier’, this book tracks the nineteenth-century origins of contemporary policy ‘expertise’ and the forms of knowledge that inform interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and elsewhere today.

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Taming the Imperial Imagination

Colonial Knowledge, International Relations, and the Anglo-Afghan Encounter, 1808–1878

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Dedicated to the memory of Sir Christopher and Elfreda Bayly
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Nothing terrifies empire quite like an unknown space. The fear of unmapped, unexplored, or inaccessible places has always induced both anxiety and fascination amongst the powerful, frequently resulting in an urge to study, to rationalize, and to conquer such territories as a consequence. This book seeks to understand how the British Empire came to know and to fear Afghanistan during the nineteenth century and how it came to rationalize those fears. The book provides a cultural history of Anglo-Afghan relations from 1808 to 1878, beginning with the arrival of the first official envoy of the British government and ending with the outbreak of the Second Anglo-Afghan War. Specifically, it explores the manner in which British perceptions and knowledge of Afghanistan shaped their understandings and guided their policy decisions. These understandings did not consist purely of ideas driven by strategic logic. Rather, throughout the nineteenth century, building on the initial works of European travellers, the British developed, refined, and acted upon an amorphous and contested ‘idea’ of Afghanistan, one that was more than simply a 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 book aims to make two contributions: firstly, to recover Anglo-Afghan relations from a historiography dominated by great power relations, specifically Anglo-Russian relations and the ‘great game’; and secondly, to contribute to the wider debate on the insights that imperial history can bring to the International Relations discipline.

The book develops in three parts, each of which corresponds to a theme. Part I on ‘knowledge’ examines how British colonial knowledge of Afghanistan was constructed through the experience of
early British explorers and their published travel accounts, focusing in particular on the works of Mountstuart Elphinstone, Alexander Burnes, and Charles Masson. Part II on ‘policy’ looks at how key policy decisions leading to the First Anglo-Afghan War were shaped by the knowledge provided by an Afghanistan ‘knowledge community’ based on this earlier body of work and the interpretations made by colonial officials. Part III on ‘exception’ considers the impact of the First Anglo-Afghan War on diplomatic relations, and it charts the emergence of a particular ‘idea’ of Afghanistan mediated by inter-imperial visions of order, as well as the intellectual and cultural influences of a particular British frontier mentality.

This book began as a PhD thesis and as such has gathered many debts along the way. It is the product of at least two institutions, the War Studies Department at King’s College London (KCL) and the International Relations Department at the London School of Economics (LSE). In particular, I would like to thank Theo Farrell, who supervised the thesis upon which this book was built. Not only has Theo read this work through on multiple occasions, at various stages, but throughout he has been a constant source of support, guidance, and encouragement, often beyond the call of duty. I am indebted to him not only for his professionalism and generosity with his time but also for his endless good humour, optimism, and enthusiasm. His approach to supervision represents everything that is good about doctoral study. Huw Bennett has also been a valuable source of guidance and encouragement, even prior to my arrival at King’s, and I thank him for his support and encouragement. I would like to thank the Defence Studies Department, KCL, which provided the PhD studentship that sustained this research, and particularly Matt Uttley for this opportunity and for his guidance. Colleagues and friends at KCL have been a much-needed source of inspiration as well as moral support. It has been a privilege working with them. In particular (yet in no particular order) I would like to thank David Parker, Ayesha Siddiqi, Avinash Paliwal, Dan Whittingham, Mike Martin, Mark Beaumont, Alex Strick Van Linschoten, Deedee Derksen, and Olivier Schmitt. The speakers and attendees at the Afghanistan Studies Group have also contributed much to my thinking; I have benefitted immensely from their insights. The staff at both the Department of War Studies and the Defence Studies Department have also been a great source of help. I’d particularly like to thank Huw...
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Parts of this book have been published elsewhere in articles I have authored and are here reprinted with permission. These include ‘The “Re-turn” to Empire in IR: Colonial Knowledge Communities and the Construction of the Idea of the Afghan Polity, 1809–1838’, Review of International Studies (Cambridge University Press); and ‘Imperial Ontological (In)security: “Buffer States”, International Relations and the Case of Anglo-Afghan Relations, 1808–1878’, European Journal of International Relations (Sage), doi: 10.1177/1354066114557569.

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The sudden and untimely passing of our uncle, Sir Christopher Bayly, in April 2015 not only has been a great loss to us as a family but also represents a great loss to South Asian scholarship, global history, and the academic community as a whole. Both he and Susan Bayly have been invaluable in their support and guidance over the years. Christopher will always be a source of considerable inspiration to me. His legacy will live on through his outstanding body of work.
and in the countless individuals from around the world that he inspired through his scholarship, his academic example, and his kind, generous nature. This book is dedicated to his memory and to the memory of Elfreda Bayly, two great Baylys whose spirit and example helped to show me the way.
Note on transliterations and archival references

In dealing with transliterations, I borrow from other works in striking a compromise between the demands of consistency, convention, simplicity, literacy, and closeness to spoken language.1 People, place names, ethnic groups, tribal groupings, and so on therefore adhere to conventional transliterations (e.g., Afghan, not Afghaun or Affghan; Kabul, not Caubul, Cabool, or Kaubul; Kandahar, not Candahar or Qandahar; Pashtun, not Pushtoon or Pashtoon). In terms of nationality, I utilize those forms familiar to the historical context to which I am referring; hence, ‘Afghan’ when referring to the post-independence period can be taken as referring to a national of that territory, whereas prior to independence it generally referred only to those inhabiting the southern belt of what is today ‘Afghanistan’, in other words, the largely Pashtun tribes stretching from Kabul through Kandahar to Herat. Likewise, ‘Persian’ or ‘Persia’ is used when referring to the region in the nineteenth century, but ‘Iranian’ or ‘Iran’ is used whilst referring to the region today. When quoting others, I have left the transliterations as per the original.

The archival references have been recorded in order to best allow for their location in the archives. Accordingly, in the case of India Office material, I have provided the class mark first. This is the reference that would be inputted into the data catalogue for the purposes of retrieval (omitting ‘IOR’ or ‘BL’). The precise detail on where to find the specific archive within the given collection is then provided. Where there is no clear title to the particular archive, I have provided a description without inverted commas. In the case of material drawn from the National Archives of India, where possible, I have adopted the ‘subject’ and topic line as per the reference guides. For example,

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‘Afghanistan: Papers relating to the affairs of’ would be found in the reference guide under ‘A’ for Afghanistan. The department and consultation section are also provided. Two versions of Elphinstone’s *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* have been consulted (the second edition of 1819 and the third edition of 1842); these are distinguished in the footnotes.