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Vincent Eyre

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### **Military Operations at Cabul, which Ended in the Retreat and Destruction of the British Army, January 1842**

Vincent Eyre (1811–81) was an English officer in the East India Company from 1827 and took part in the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839–42), which ended in disaster for the British. He would later become a major-general and a Knight Commander of the Star of India, but in this work Eyre lucidly describes his experiences as a lieutenant in the war, during which he was severely wounded. In addition to providing a wealth of military detail, he also includes an account of how he was captured with his family by Akbar Khan in January 1842 and held hostage for nearly nine months. Eyre kept a diary throughout, and the manuscript was smuggled to a friend in India prior to publication in England in 1843. This updated third edition offers insights into both military and personal misfortune.

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# Military Operations at Cabul

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January 1842

VINCENT EYRE



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THE  
MILITARY OPERATIONS  
AT  
C A B U L,  
WHICH ENDED IN THE  
RETREAT AND DESTRUCTION OF THE BRITISH ARMY,  
JANUARY 1842.  
WITH A JOURNAL OF  
IMPRISONMENT IN AFFGHANISTAN.

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BY LIEUT. VINCENT EYRE,  
BENGAL ARTILLERY,  
LATE DEPUTY COMMISSARY OF ORDNANCE AT CABUL.

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THIRD EDITION.

LONDON:  
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET.

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TO

MAJOR-GENERAL W. S. WHISH, C.B.

LATE COMMANDANT OF THE BENGAL ARTILLERY,

*This Work is Dedicated,*

AS A SLIGHT MARK OF ESTEEM FOR HIS PUBLIC AND  
PRIVATE WORTH,

AND OF GRATITUDE FOR PAST KINDNESSES,

BY

HIS SINCERE FRIEND,

VINCENT EYRE.

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## NOTICE BY THE EDITOR.

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THE original manuscript of this Journal was sent by Lieutenant Eyre in parts, as it was finished, and as opportunity offered, to a military friend in India. Even when the last part reached his hands, the eventual liberation of the Cabul prisoners was a matter of painful uncertainty ; and his judgment prompted him to transmit it entire, and without comment, to the Author's immediate relations in this country. There is a point connected with its publication *now*, which must not be thought to have been disregarded from any anxiety that this account should be the first:— it is, the question whether it should have been

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withheld until the result of the inquiry now pending in India should be known. It is considered that sufficient delay has been already incurred to insure this end, and that all such investigations will have been closed before a copy of this book can find its way to India. The Journal is therefore at once printed as it came, in concurrence with the writer's own idea that it cannot fail to interest the British public.

E. EYRE.

Athenæum Club,  
Dec. 29. 1842.

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## PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR.

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THE following notes were penned to relieve the monotony of an Affghan prison, while yet the events which they record continued fresh in my memory. I now give them publicity in the belief that the information which they contain on the dreadful scenes lately enacted in Affghanistan, though clothed in a homely garb, will scarcely fail to be acceptable to many of my countrymen, both in India and England, who may be ignorant of the chief particulars. The time, from the 2d November, 1841, on which day the sudden popular outbreak at Cabul took place, to the 13th January, 1842, which witnessed the annihilation of the last small remnant of our unhappy

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force at Gundamuk, was one continued tragedy. The massacre of Sir Alexander Burnes and his associates, — the loss of our commissariat fort,—the defeat of our troops under Brigadier Shelton at Beymaroo, — the treacherous assassination of Sir William Macnaghten, our envoy and minister, — and lastly, the disastrous retreat and utter destruction\* of a force consisting of 5000 fighting men and upwards of 12,000 camp-followers, — are events which will assuredly rouse the British Lion from his repose, and excite an indignant spirit of inquiry in every breast. Men will not be satisfied, in this case, with a bare statement of the facts,

\* In the late accounts from Gen. Pollock's army at Cabul, it is stated that the number of *skeletons* found on the line of march was *very small* compared with the thousands which had been reported and believed to have perished. But too few have as yet *made their appearance* to require that the above statement should be qualified. The reader who continues to the end will have little hope that it can *ever* prove *very* incorrect. — EDITOR.

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but they will doubtless require to be made acquainted with the causes which brought about such awful effects. We have lost six entire regiments of infantry, three companies of sappers, a troop of European horse artillery, half the mountain-train battery, nearly a whole regiment of regular cavalry, and four squadrons of irregular horse, besides a well-stocked magazine, which *alone*, taking into consideration the cost of transport up to Cabul, may be estimated at nearly a million sterling. From first to last, more than 100 British officers have fallen: their names will be found in the Appendix. I glance but slightly at the *political* events of this period, not having been one of the initiated; and I do not pretend to enter into *minute* particulars with regard to even our *military* transactions, more especially those not immediately connected with the sad catastrophe which it has been my ill-fortune to witness, and

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whereof I now endeavour to pourtray the leading features. In these notes I have been careful to state only what I know to be undeniable facts. I have set down nothing on mere hearsay evidence, nor any thing which cannot be attested by living witnesses, or by existing documentary evidence. In treating of matters which occurred under my personal observation, it has been difficult to avoid *altogether* the occasional expression of my own individual opinion: but I hope it will be found that I have made no observations bearing hard on men or measures, that are either uncalled for, or will not stand the test of future investigation. To Major Pottinger, C.B., the well-known hero of Herat, whose subsequent acts have amply sustained the fame which he there acquired, I am much indebted for a great deal of interesting matter relative to the events at Charekar. To Captain Colin Mackenzie of the Madras

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army, political assistant at Peshawur, my obligations are greater than I can express, for his most valuable aid in the preparation of these notes, as well as for his excellent account of the attack on Brigadier Anquetil's fort, and the sad detail of the Envoy's cruel murder, and the circumstances therewith connected. To Captain Lawrence, late military secretary to the Envoy, and to Captain Troup, late Brigade-Major to the Shah's force, I am likewise bound to offer my best acknowledgments for much important information.

The plan of cantonments and of the surrounding country, being drawn entirely from memory, requires indulgent criticism; but I trust it is sufficiently accurate to give the reader a tolerably correct idea of the nature of our position.

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#### ERRATA IN THE FIRST EDITION.

- Page xx., for “*Synd*” read “*Syud*,” a priest.  
209., line 15., for a semicolon substitute a full stop after  
Lieut. St. George, 37th N. I.  
line 17., for a full stop substitute a comma after  
“force.”  
213., note, for “Brigadier-Major” read “Brigade-Major.”  
317. Add to the list of prisoners released the following  
names :—  
Capt. Johnson.  
Mrs. Trevor, 8 children.  
Capt. Anderson.  
Mrs. Anderson, 3 children.  
Capt. Troup.  
Capt. Bygrave.  
Dr. Campbell.  
325., note, for “pp. 95. 97.” read “pp. 216. 220.”

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## NOTICE BY THE EDITOR.

THE manuscript of the following pages, forming the conclusion of Lieut. Eyre's Journal, reached me only a short time since, having been lost — irretrievably as he thought — from his pocket, on the march towards India. It is issued in the present shape, as most considerate towards the purchasers of the original volume; who, by removing the last eight pages — from 313 to 319 inclusive — and substituting this Supplement, may have their book complete.

The communication by Capt. Mackenzie (referred to in pp. 25. and 44.), will now be found in the Appendix; to which I have also added Lieut. Crawford's account of the imprisonment of himself and his brother-officers at Ghuznee. They were eventually transferred to Mahomed Akber, and released with the prisoners of Cabul. I should have hesitated thus to appropriate what is so deserving of separate publication, but that, as it has appeared in an Indian paper, it seems not to have been destined for an-

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other shape ; in which case, its adoption here may afford many friends of those officers a gratification, which they might not otherwise obtain.

The other additions to the Appendix, and the few notes, are such only as have been considered strictly illustrative of the Journal. They might even have been usefully increased, but for an unwillingness to swell the work with matter not original. Among these the despatch of Major-Gen. Elphinstone, and some extracts from a memorandum of that officer, deserve attention.

The interest attached to the events, which are the subject of this narrative, has drawn to it much attention, and, of course, some criticism. The author has, on the whole, very much to gratify him in the result of such an ordeal : but there have been a few qualifications of the general praise, which, with this opportunity, should perhaps be noticed.

On the question which has arisen, whether the particulars narrated have been allowed publicity *too soon*, there may be a fair difference of opinion. For this, as has been before stated, the author is not strictly answerable : but I may be allowed also to say that *I* consulted, and had the sanction of high military judgment on the point ; and I knew besides that the MS. had, *in transitu*, been seen by individuals of professional discretion

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and experience, none of whom suggested that it should be, even for a time, withheld. The only doubt I ever entertained had respect to its publication in *India*, pending “the Inquiry.” This, however, was to open soon after Christmas, at *Ferozepore*, whither no copy of the book can arrive *before* the middle of April. The danger, then, of “prejudicing the Inquiry” is but small.

“But,” say a few, “is it nothing to prejudice the minds of those at home? The minds of those at home had been, in *reality*, prejudiced, as much as could be done, many months ago. Every one at all interested in these events *was possessed* of the outline, which Mr. Eyre’s history fills up; and both the responsible personages and their acts had been long since dealt with by those at home, in an *undiscriminating* spirit of condemnation, which his work tends rather to correct. An erroneous analogy, as I think, is resorted to, when “those at home” are likened to a *court* or a *jury*, or the *author* to “a *jurymen* prematurely delivering his verdict.” He cannot be more than a *witness*; and those at home will carefully compare his testimony with that of others, and with the issue. If he be correct, no one is injured; if not, it can only recoil upon himself; but to state at *any* time what he knows, though he may have to give it afterwards in evidence, is *no* offence in a witness,

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either morally or judicially ; while to suppose of the *real* court and jury, who must investigate the disasters of Cabul, looking at the constitution of such a court, that their decision could be influenced by this history, is quite impossible. It is, however, very satisfactory to those who have given it to the world, to see how every day proves more and more, as the real truth creeps out, that, had not Lieut. Eyre been restrained by a spirit admitted by a distinguished reviewer to be, “ under the circumstances, indeed extraordinary,” he *might* have revealed much more, which he has had the good taste and feeling to withhold.\* It is further satisfactory to see already so many of his statements confirmed, as are so, both by the Papers just presented to Parliament, and from private sources ; among these may be particularised the Journal of the Retreat, by Capt. Johnson, another of the prisoners, which has appeared in the Bombay Times. I should, too, in justice to my brother, state that, on finding that his MS. had been sent to me, he hastened to request that, as it had been “ written under every sort of disadvantage,” I would not hesitate to omit any passage which might by possibility give pain to others. This letter arrived

\* See particularly a letter from Ferozepore, in the N. & M. Gazette of 18th inst.

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too late for the first edition ; but, though I *had* myself kept this in view, it was quite impracticable to omit all that *any party* might wish omitted ; nor would it have been fair, either to the public or the author, so to mutilate a work of so much historic interest. In scenes too, in which *all* the actors *cannot* be blameless, blame will often *appear* to be imputed by the most meagre recital of what was done or left undone ; and so the case is here ; the bare facts are the severest part of all ; but they are such facts as, with the public characters whom they implicate, have ever been the legitimate subjects both of history and criticism ; and the idea, that silence for any time was incumbent on any actor in them, is as new to me, as the circumstances are, happily, new and unprecedented in British annals.

One apology, which is found for Lieut. Eyre's "partiality and prejudice," his *friends* must needs deny him — the suggestion that he writes under the influence of "frustrated hopes and blighted prospects." These terms in no way apply to him. He is in the same service as before ; and nothing that occurred at Cabul can have *diminished*, at any rate, his professional hopes and prospects.

In the brief remarks which I have to add, I shall confine myself to the few instances in which

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Lieut. Eyre's *veracity*, or *consistency*, is called in question. The following critique appears to me unfair.\* "Asserting his correctness, the author tells us — 'In these notes I have been careful to state only what I know to be undeniable facts. I have set down nothing on *mere hearsay evidence*, nor any thing which cannot be attested by living witnesses, or by existing documentary evidence.' Yet, in the face of this declaration, he acknowledges hearsay evidence (certainly of eminent men), from Major Pottinger, Capts. Mackenzie, Lawrence, and Troup; and, after his departure from the retreating army as a prisoner, describes all the motions and casualties of the force with as much minuteness, as if he had continued to be an eye-witness." This is surely an unusual apprehension of what is *mere hearsay evidence* — information, which he acknowledges as "valuable aid," given by some of the "living witnesses," expressly for historical purposes. Again; — among these living witnesses were some, his fellow prisoners, captured *towards the end* of the retreat, Major Griffiths, Capts. Johnson and Bygrave, &c. — How can particulars supplied by them be termed "mere hearsay evidence"?

On one other point the author's consistency

\* *Literary Gazette*.



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has been impugned, with no more reason, as I humbly think. — Discrediting the existence of a *conspiracy* throughout Affghanistan and at Cabul against the British, the *Edinburgh Review* considers that Mr. Eyre on this point *contradicts himself*. Now, first, as to the conspiracy:— the reviewer does not account in any other way for the *simultaneous* risings against, and massacres of, our men and officers in widely distant provinces. At Cabul, Charekar, and Ghuznee, no two of which are less than 90 miles from each other, the flame burst forth at the same time; and, on the 2d of November, Sir A. Burnes was murdered, the Ghoorka regiment assailed, and shortly annihilated, Capt. Woodburn and his escort cut off, and Ghuznee surrounded. The reviewer does not dispose of the warnings of Major Pottinger, nor *attempt* to get over that of Taj-Mahomed, nor notice (he may not have seen it) the concurrent testimony of Mohun Lall.\* This individual, to whom we owe so much, says, “ In *October* last, the chiefs entered into the solemn agreement with each other, and thus the Eastern Giljyes stood up against our arms.” But *he* also agrees with Lieutenant Eyre, in saying that the outbreak at Cabul *commenced* by an at-

\* See his letter, App. E.

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tack of an insignificant force on Sir A. Burnes's house; *commenced*, not *originated*. "Yet," observes Mohun Lall, "not a battalion was sent to our protection."—Mr. Eyre terms the same *commencement* "an insignificant ebullition, which military energy and promptitude ought to have crushed in the bud;"—that is to say,—the train *being* laid, a *spark* set fire to it, which *spark* might and ought to have been trodden upon at once. These statements are surely reconcilable.—Another alleged inconsistency is the following: "In the whole Affghan nation," it is said in one place, "we could not *reckon* on a single friend;" in another place, that *some* chiefs, especially the *Kuzzilbashes*, "*remained neutral*, until our want of energy, and the booty of the *commissariat fort*, determined them to join in the general combination to drive us from the country." "This," observes the reviewer, "proves that the other passage is idle talk; we *had* friends in plenty." Now the friendship of these friends is thus *illustrated* by Mohun Lall:—"Notwithstanding the Giljye, Caboolee, Kohistanee, and the *Persian* (*Kuzzilbash*) chiefs made solemn oaths with us,—wrote the agreement on the Holy Koran to take our cause,—received abundant money from us,—but every body cheated us like devils. Khan Shereen, the Persian chief, promised to give every assist-

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ance, which he never did," &c. These Kuzzil-bashes, then, were scarcely friends who could be "reckoned on;" — they may have been the *best*, and better than *none*, in our distress: but, both in our reverses and our late prosperity, they have verified the poet's comment on the friendship of the world: —

"Donec eris felix, multos numerabis amicos;  
Tempora si fuerint nubila, solus eris."

Lieut. Eyre is consistent enough, but he does not mean *Affghan* friendship.

Having attempted in these few observations to show that he has not been either inconsiderate or inconsistent, I have lastly to *admit* that on two or three points he must have been misinformed. They personally concern a distinguished individual, who himself liberally allows that such slight inaccuracies are quite reconcilable with a "desire to state the truth, and nothing but the truth."\* The reader will please to receive the following, stated from, of course, the only satisfactory authority, to be the more strictly correct version on the points referred to: —

"P. 5. As to the alleged neglect to send a mi-

\* A note to this effect was hastily annexed to the 2d and 3d Editions. It is now repeated here, to insure more general circulation.

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litary force against the Nijrow chiefs, *Lord Auckland* had nothing to do with it. The Envoy pressed this measure upon Major-Gen. Elphinstone; but he, for prudential reasons, partly on account of the advanced season of the year, objected to this employment of the troops."

" P. 16. As to the reduction of the payments to the Giljye chiefs.—*This* measure did not originate with Lord Auckland, but was one 'to which the narrowness of the king's finances led him, under Sir William Macnaghten's advice, to have recourse.'\* Lord Auckland was not aware of it, until after the outbreak at Cabul. Sir William Macnaghten says†, 'the necessities of his Majesty, and the frequent prohibitions I have received against further reliance on the resources of the British government, appeared to admit of no alternative.'"

" P. 28. This passage relates to the supposed delay in accepting the resignation by Major-Gen. Elphinstone of his command. It was, in fact, accepted by Lord Auckland as soon as it was sent in officially. The poor General did, however, indisputably *wish* to resign before; but seems to have had doubts whether he could do

\* Parl. Pap. on Afghanistan. No. 1.

† Ibid. No. 2.

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so without discredit. The inaccuracy in the text on such a point might easily have originated, and most probably did, in some equivocal expressions of his own.”

E. EYRE.

Athenæum Club,  
1st March 1843.

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