The Man Outside: The Problem with the External Perception of Afghanistan in Historical Sources

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Summary
The article aims to unravel the biases of those sources relating to modern Afghan history, which were written by foreigners. In fact, these make up the bulk of the available source material. The recurring attitudes range from colonial chauvinism to a perpetuated myth of Afghanistan as the last bastion of the wild and uncivilized East, which successfully fought of two European colonial powers in the 19th century. Also the allure of plain exoticism is echoing in many historical sources. It is attempted to show as an impressionistic sketch, by citing freely from textual and graphic material, the distorted perspective of these historical records. This may help to understand some of the prejudices which are often found in the literature on Afghanistan and which thus strongly influence still today how we perceive the country at the Hindu Kush and its culture.

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I Introduction: Identity, history and the problem with the external perspective

Nation-building is a key topic in the current development discourse on Afghanistan, and thus the "national" identity of Afghans is back on the agenda. Seeing as common culture and language can hardly serve as parameters for this identity in the case of the proverbial "land at the crossroads of Asia", it is primarily their common historical experience that unites the country's multiple ethnic groups. This history basically stretches over the last two and a half centuries, starting with the foundation of the Durrani Empire in 1747.

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If we factor out the more recent events and concentrate instead on the time between the mid-18th and mid-20th centuries as the collective historical experience of Afghans, then writing the history of these two centuries faces some serious difficulties. The fundamental problem of Afghan historiography is the strong colouring of the sources on which it depends. The following essay is a tentative, and thus limited, attempt to detect the distortion of Western source material on Afghanistan in the last few centuries. In dealing with the relevant source material, the historian comes up against the phenomenon that although the country was spared the full impact of colonialism, the bulk of textual and graphical records relating to its history since the 18th century stems primarily from British observers, or more generally speaking, from Westerners for the time around 1900 and the first decades of the 20th century. Most of the rich source material on Afghanistan produced in recent centuries is stored in archives outside the country; local archives have basically remained inaccessible to this day.

The material available consists of published and unpublished accounts of visiting foreigners and military servicemen, official gazetteers and secret reports, sketched maps, early graphics and photographs. They date from the time when the contact between Europeans and what was then the kingdom of Kabul was being intensified from the late 18th century onwards.[2] We owe many informative descriptions to the period of the run-up to the First Anglo-Afghan War in the 1830s and to the two British campaigns of 1838-42 and 1878-80. After the Second War, only a few foreigners sojourned in Kabul – at the invitation of Amir Abdur Rahman and Amir Habibullah (1901-19). Their number grew considerably on the opening of the country in the 1920s.

The problem with these exterior views is the Western observers' limited ability to comprehend and accurately reproduce what they observed. Their written accounts are coated with colonial biases, those subtle Eurocentric prejudices, which persisted throughout this epoch and which Edward Said attempted to debunk in his much acclaimed, but also highly controversial description and criticism of *Orientalism*, published nearly three decades ago.[3] There is no need to go into this discourse in any detail here. The Western sources relating to Afghanistan between 1750 and 1950 clearly show this tendency to misperceive and misrepresent what they experienced, so their information can seldom be taken at face value. But in the particular case of Afghanistan, which became the last bastion of the "Oriental" culture in the heart of a colonised Asia, the "colonial" sources are not only permeated with pejorative undertones. They are inclined to exaggerate the adventure that makes up the myth of "wild Afghanistan" and virtually hanker after the exotic. Moreover, most of these

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2 For an overview of Westerners travelling through Afghanistan, see P. Bucherer-Dietschi, "Europäische Reisende des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts in Afghanistan", in *Materialien zur zeitgenössischen Afghanistanforschung*, Working Papers 163 (Bochum, 1997), pp. 5-21.

3 E. W. Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1978).

records offer fairly unrepresentative insights, given that they were commonly produced under odd circumstances and often haphazardly compiled.

The fact that colonial ethnography can provide useful information once the layers of biases are stripped away need not be questioned, of course. However, recognising what information needs to be sifted out, where the historical reality ends and attitude begins, or where the author got snared by his own romantic ideas does present some real problems. The study of past Western perceptions of Afghanistan, the Afghans and their culture can be highly instructive because many of these attitudes still persist. Moreover, as these false and romanticised images were internalised by an Afghan elite to some extent and have been adopted by a wider public today, they clearly influence not only the identity given to Afghans from outside, but also Afghans' own self-perception.[4] Due to the complexity of the problem, this essay limits itself to an impressionistic look at examples taken from the large pool of available sources.

II Colonial chauvinism

A very poignant attitude that characterises almost all the sources produced by foreigners is what could be labelled "colonial chauvinism". One of the most memorable dictums of the epoch perfectly sums up this attitude and is in itself a sobering echo of the Victorian *zeitgeist* towards the close of the Empire's apogee. It is a single line of verse by Rudyard Kipling: "Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." With this famous phrase (written in 1892), the celebrated "poet of the Empire" introduces a ballad about a duel and the conciliation between a stereotypical British officer and a thieving but noble Pathan chieftain. In the tale, the two are pitted against each other at the Khyber Pass.

Unfortunately, the phrase has often been taken out of context, misinterpreted and deliberately misused as an imperialistic and even racist slogan. But this general reception of Kipling's first line of a petty cross-border adventure epitomises the biased attitude that prevails in the numerous travel journals and war diaries reporting from Afghanistan in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is the tale of the acquitting, upright, adventurous and gallant British colonial soldier on the one hand and the noble savage, the religiously fanatic Pathan tribesman, the determined and cunning warrior who is garlanded in cartridge belts and for whom the knife and the bullet were second nature on the other. In general terms, it describes two separate worlds split along the legendary and extremely sensitive Northwest Frontier. In the eyes of many contemporaries, the latter was the notorious dividing line between civilisation and barbarism, between colonial India and what was to become modern Afghanistan.

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[4] How and to what extent autochthonous sources are distorted would also be interesting to examine, but would go beyond the scope of this essay.

The 19th century British records relating to Afghan culture practically all share this chauvinistic tenor. We find derogatory remarks even in the earliest of these accounts. What George Forster, a civil servant employed by the East India Company, had to say about the capital of Kabul is telling enough. When Forster stopped there on his way overland from India to England in 1783, he left this disillusioning report:

> The fortification, which is of a simple construction, with scarcely a ditch, and the houses built of rough stones, clay, and unburned bricks, exhibit a mean appearance, and are ill suited to the grandeur which I expected to see in the capital of a great empire. But the Afghans are a rude, unlettered people, and their chiefs have little propensity to the refinements of life, which indeed their country is ill qualified to gratify.[5]

Forster's perception of Kabul was generally shared by later visitors.[6] In their narratives, Kabul was lauded for the attractiveness of its natural position and surrounding scenery.[7] The authors acknowledged that the city possessed "when first seen from afar, a very imposing appearance".[8] But seen from close range, they almost unanimously held it to be virtually devoid of noteworthy buildings.[9] In their eyes, Kabul was "a mean collection of mean houses",[10] "none of them remarkable for elegance or size".[11] The city as a whole is said to have had a "miserable appearance"[12] without any "external or internal evidence of grandeur",[13] and despite its pre-eminence as the capital of the emirate it was considered the least remarkable among Afghan towns.[14] One author wrote openly: "The desire to build a new Kabul is not surprising when one has seen the present city."[15]

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5 G. Forster, *A Journey from Bengal to England through the Northern Part of India, Kashmire, Afghanistan, and Persia, and into Russia by the Caspian-Sea*, vol. II (London, 1808; repr. Delhi, 1970), p. 79.

6 Among the British authors of 19th-century travelogues only J. Greenwood, *Narrative of the Late Victorious Campaign in Affghanistan under General Pollock* (London, 1844), p. 237, and J. Rattray, cited in J. W. Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan*, vol. I (London 1851; repr. Delhi 1999), pp. 476-77, and A. Burnes, *Travels into Bokkara*, vol. II (London, 1834; repr. Karachi, 1973), p. 137, were positively impressed by Kabul.

7 C. Masson, *Narrative of Various Journeys in Balochistan, Afghanistan, and the Panjab*, vol. II (London 1842), p. 261; R. Klass, *Land of the High Flags* (New York, 1964), p. 67.

8 G. R. Gleig, *Sale's Brigade in Afghanistan* (London, 1846), p. 68.

9 G. Forster. *op. cit.*, p. 79; I. A. Burnes, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 147; N. Allen, *Diary of a March through Sinde and Affghanistan* (London, 1843), p. 302; G. T. Vigne, *A Personal Narrative of a Visit to Ghuzni, Kabul, and Afghanistan* (London, 1840), p. 159; J. Atkinson, *The Expedition into Affghanistan* (London, 1842), p. 285; W. Griffith, *Journal of Travels in Assam, Burma, Bootan, Affghanistan and the Neighbouring Countries* (Calcutta, 1847), p. 386; Shahamat Ali, *Journal of an Expedition to Kabul* (London, 1847; repr. Delhi, 1985), p. 250; H. Hensman, *The Afghan War of 1879-80* (London, 1881), p. 65; E. H. Clarke, *Imperial Gazetteer of India: Afghanistan and Nepal* (Calcutta 1908; repr. Lahore, 1999), p. 58.

10 W. Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 386.

11 C. Masson quoted from his manuscripts, IOR Mss Eur B218: 33; also similar C. Masson, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 261.

12 J. Atkinson, *op. cit.*, p. 318.

13 E. H. Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

14 X. Raymond, *Afghanistan* (Paris, 1848), p. 30.

15 J. A. Gray, *At the Court of the Amir* (London, 1895), p. 32.

Nearly a century after Forster's visit, the war correspondent Hensman still had high expectations of Kabul. But the curiosity about the blank spot on British maps had by then given way to a mystification of the scene of British military disasters:

> There has been for so many years such a peculiar interest attaching to the name of Cabul, that one naturally expected to be struck with the appearance of the city; and it was therefore disappointing to find nothing in its features remarkable or impressive.[16]

Forster's low opinion of Afghan civilisation reverberated in later accounts. One example of many is a passage included in the famous diary of Lady Sale. The wife of General Sale, who was a key figure in the First Anglo-Afghan War, wrote the following while she was kept in captivity at Kabul and its hinterland:

> The Afghans of the capital are a little more civilized; but the country gentlemen and their retainers are, I fancy, much the same kind of people as those Alexander [the Great] encountered.[17]

Also the English engineer Frank A. Martin, who was employed in the government workshops in Kabul at the turn of the 20th century, made a similarly prejudiced comparison:

> Speaking, generally, there is much in the daily life and customs of the Afghans that reminds one of England some three hundred years ago as depicted in books and histories.[18]

Sometimes these authors tried to hide their impudence in a gentlemanly fashion. As if it would lend their own opinion more credibility, they occasionally quoted local authorities instead. Arthur Conolly, for example, whose travel accounts were published in 1838, i.e. just two years before he was sent to Bukhara as a delegate, where he was imprisoned and eventually executed, quoted a native of Herat as saying: "... if dirt killed people, where would the Afghans be!"[19] Ziemke, the ambassador of Nazi Germany, diplomatically referred to the Babur-Nama, the memoirs of the progenitor of the Mughal dynasty, when he wrote that Afghans are simple-minded and stubborn: "They don't reflect much, and think ahead even less." [20] Ziemke's personal opinion is all too obvious. Similarly, the American electrical engineer Jewett, who was employed near Kabul in the 1910s, included the following scathing remarks made by a Turkish commercial traveller in the published letters to his niece: "... Afghanistan is a bad place. The people are all liars and thieves, and there is nothing in the country but ignorance, greed, and *shaitani*."[21] Jewett did not hold

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16 H. Hensman, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

17 F. Sale, *A Journal of the Disasters in Afghanistan* (Franklin, 2002), p. 53.

18 F. A. Martin, *Under the Absolute Amir of Afghanistan* (London/New York, 1907; repr. Lahore 1998), p. 58.

19 A. Conolly, *Journey to the North of India overland from England through Russia, Persia, and Afghanistan*, vol. II (London, 1838; Delhi 2001), p. 3.

20 K. Ziemke: *Als deutscher Gesandter in Afghanistan*, (Berlin, 1939): p. 46.

21 M. J. Bell (ed.), *An American engineer in Afghanistan: From the letters and notes of A. C. Jewett* (Minneapolis, 1948), p. 179.

back with his own strong opinion about the people of the "Sodom"[22] of Kabul either: "The Kabulis are a lazy, lying, thieving, licentious lot. They are cowards too; the barbarians [countrymen] are far better fighters and better men all around."[23] And on another occasion he wrote:

> I have met a few of the most bigoted, arrogant, and ignorant people I have ever known. You could write reams and still be unable to convey what the country and the people are like. You have to see for yourself.[24]

III The myth of Afghanistan

The accounts of foreigners are not only imbued with plain chauvinism. The political developments stigmatised Afghanistan as the last bastion against the dominance of a European power in the East, as the bone of contention between Britain and Russia, and as an adventurous and mystified battleground on which the aspirations of the redcoat colonisers were not only endangered through the Russian advances on Central Asia, but also shattered by unparalleled military catastrophes. Afghanistan, and in particular Kabul as the main scene of these disasters, became a cliché. In the British imagination, basically even throughout Europe, the land of the unpolished and resisting mountain people living beyond the Khyber loomed large and inspired many with concern and fascination, awe and wonder.

No other document of the time can illustrate this ambiguity better than the celebrated painting by Lady Elizabeth Butler entitled 'The Remnants of an Army' (fig. I.1).[25] It was painted in 1879 when almost four decades after the tragic occurrence the Empire was about to repeat a fateful mistake. The scene depicts Dr Brydon, idealised as the sole survivor of the British expeditionary force to Kabul.[26] The British servicemen and the camp followers, who numbered about 16,000, had to retreat from the capital in January 1842. They were all massacred on the way eastwards to the Khyber, with the exception of this wounded surgeon on a lame horse. Brydon managed to reach Jellalabad alive, where a beleaguered contingent of British troops was patiently awaiting their comrades.

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22 *Ibid.*, p. 248, and p. 318: 'I have always compared Kabul with Sodom, taking the Bible for what Sodom was like. Kabul cannot be worse, nor any better.'

23 *Ibid.*, p. 318. For the pioneering Afghanistan ethnographer Elphinstone, urban society showed signs of moral decline. He wrote about the Afghans in general, saying that he knew of "no people in Asia who have fewer vices, or are less voluptuous or debauched", but he added "the people of towns are acquiring a taste for debauchery" [M. Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* (London, 1815; repr. Graz, 1969), p. 252]. He could have learned from Sidi Ali Reïs' travel account of the mid-16th century that "decadence" was not at all new to Kabul [A. Vambéry: *The Travels and Adventures of the Turkish Admiral Sidi Ali Reïs* (London, 1899), pp. 64-5].

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 192-3.

25 Lady Elizabeth Butler (1846-1933), *The Remnants of an Army*, oil on canvas, 132 x 234 cm, 1879, preserved in the Tate Gallery, London; published in B. Omrani/M. Leeming (eds.), *Afghanistan* (Hong Kong, 2005), p. 642.

26 Brydon was not, in fact, the only survivor of the massacre. Several women and officers were taken prisoner by the Afghans, among them General Elphinstone, Lady Sale and Capt. Mackenzie.

The scene epitomises the whole ordeal: Brydon as the heroic antihero; his head bandaged, his face turned away due to exhaustion, despair and humiliation; his hands holding onto the saddle tightly, seemingly concentrating all the remaining strength in his feeble body on this firm grip, to be guided by his horse over the last few yards to the safety of the fortified Jellalabad garrison. The animal is equally worn out, with its back arched and its head lowered. This image of defeat and tragedy was incised deeply into the self-consciousness of the Victorian age. It clearly tarnished the grandeur of the British Empire, but the coevals of Lady Butler preferred to see it as a call for revenge rather than for criticism of colonial politics.

It hardly comes as a surprise, then, that not long after Lady Butler had finished her painting, another symbolic picture was to circulate in the high societies of Britain and India. Published in the press, it told a completely different story. In a new type of media with the claim to produce realistic impressions, a panorama taken by the famed frontier photographer Burke in 1879/80 depicts the dilapidated citadel of Kabul, the Bala Hissar, seen from the southeast (fig. I.2).[27] A group of British officers in shiny uniforms, proud and upright, stand at the upper part of a ramp that leads to the citadel's main gate, while natives dressed in rags cower below. Another Afghan was made to pose with his donkey in the dried-up moat further to the left. Close by, two water-carriers shouldering their filled goatskin leather bags were halted on the same dirt track. They pose as additional foreground figures. One of them apparently shows his dislike for the spectacle by turning his face away. The natives in the photo appear beaten, disorientated and overwhelmed by the 'superiority' of British civilisation. By contrast, the victorious soldiers and the ruined Bala Hissar, a symbol of Afghan power and resistance, were to signal to the world outside that the wheel of fortune had turned for good and that the Empire had restored its reputation of invincibility by retaliating with force and justice.

Needless to say, history knows another truth as well. It is one that remembers the slaughtering of the British delegation inside the walls of this citadel just a few months earlier, the disastrous defeat of the British force at Maiwand near Kandahar soon after this photograph was taken and the eventual withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan. Britain knew full well that Afghanistan couldn't easily be held militarily. Thus, this early image of the Kabul Citadel became an emblem of both the victory of the colonial power and the mystified country beyond the lines of control.

A few decades later, the interest in Afghanistan faded somewhat. The Great Game, the competition between Russia and Britain for hegemony in Asia, basically ended as both sides increasingly needed their energy for the consolidation and maintenance

[27] For a biography of J. Burke, see O. Khan, *From Kashmir to Kabul* (Munich/Ahmedabad, 2002).

of their vast dominions.[28] Moreover, the sabre-rattling got louder in Europe itself and eventually led to the "Great War". Afghanistan, on the other hand, stabilised during this power vacuum and was successfully unified under central control. In the perception of Europeans, however, the 'forbidden kingdom' beyond the Khyber gradually fell back into oblivion. And yet, the 19th century idea of the "Wild East" resisting civilisation persisted. The images of the past could still be rehashed as icons of the adventure and tragedy connected with the Afghanistan chapters in the Empire's history. So Burke's picture of the Bala Hissar was used decades later to advertise Liebig's canned meat (1910), just as Butler's Brydon was printed on similar collector cards promoting Franklyn's cigarettes (c. 1930).

IV The snare of Orientalism

The popularity of the myth of Afghanistan is only one dimension of a much wider phenomenon that pervaded the records of Westerners at the time, that is, the widespread fascination with the mysterious Orient. As Asia came increasingly within the orbit of European influence in the 16th and 17th centuries, the little information available spurred wild fantasies in the West. Delegates, traders, missionaries and adventurers swarmed to follow in the footsteps of early travellers like Marco Polo, friar Rubruck and Clavijo. It was now the time for personalities like the Jesuit Goëz, Sir Thomas Roe, who was the King of England's ambassador to the court of Jahangir, or the French Chardin, Tavernier or Bernier to explore the foreign lands and bring back detailed and often rhapsodic reports. Similarly, Olfert Dapper's voluminous *Asia oder: Ausführliche Beschreibung des Reichs des Grossen Mogols und eines grossen Theils von Indien* (1681) must have been as well received at European courts as the somewhat earlier *Orientalische Reisebeschreibung* by Andersen and Iversen, published by Adam Olearius (1667). In fact, the fear of contact with the distant Orient diminished at the same pace as the Occident started to perceive itself as superior through the Enlightenment, the onset of industrialisation and, in more practical terms, the repulse of the Turks at Vienna and on the Balkans. By the latter half of the 18th century, the cultural transfer had reached a level at which exploration and travel literature effectively disenchanted the Orient. The Occident was eager to learn.[29] Around 1800, however, the increasing political domination of the West over the East had tilted the balance and created an arrogance that still persists today in Western views of the Orient. As a by-product, the feeling of superiority allowed the Occident to appropriate, construct and consume a new image of Oriental magnificence.

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[28] For the colonial superpowers, of course, Afghanistan still remained important, but the times of the "Forward Policy" or the "Masterly Inactivity" definitely ended now. See V. Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan* (Stanford, 1969), p. 117.

[29] The disenchantment was perspicaciously studied by Osterhammel in his work "Die Entzauberung Asiens".

In art and architecture, we owe *chinoiserie* to this change in attitude, i.e. the revival of the arabesque and the moresque in the rococo style, Chinese pagodas, Turkish pavilions and steam baths in palatial gardens. The Royal Pavilion in Brighton is possibly the best case in point. This seaside resort used by the then Prince Regent and later King George IV was remodelled in the early 19th century in a pseudo Late Mughal style. This transcultural experience was then primarily a privilege of the elite, of course, but by 1900 Orientalism had gained a strong foothold across the classes of European societies. The general public was informed about the region by literature of all sorts, illustrated papers reported on the most distant places, academia was in full swing and exhibitions contributed what else the public needed to know, or rather believed it needed to know, about the Orient.[30]

Turning the discussion to sources on Afghanistan again, the remote emirate at the Hindu Kush was particularly susceptible to being portrayed as exotic. At the time when the Russians were starting to rebuild Tashkent, when the eclectic European architecture of the Civil Lines and Cantonments was substantially changing the appearance of Indian cities throughout the Empire, and when pin-ups of European ladies with décolletés were adorning the ceilings of mansions in Qajar Iran, Afghanistan almost completely remained outside the influence of Western culture. Reversely, for most Europeans it was hardly more than a 'name and a ghost'.[31]

The few Westerners invited by the Amir were allowed to proceed beyond the famous signpost of later times at the mouth of the Khyber Pass, which warned that 'It is absolutely forbidden to cross this border into Afghan territory'.[32] They entered the secluded country well aware of the adventures and risks awaiting them, but also of the privilege connected with this experience. Just as the writing servicemen of the British expeditionary forces then knew about the demand for their war diaries at home, these physicians, engineers and other specialists contracted to help in modernising the country brought along cameras and often noted down their observations in minute detail. On their return to Europe, they published their narratives, held public lectures on Afghanistan and showed this curious land beyond the Khyber to a home audience in lantern slides. Afghanistan was a true opportunity for these pioneers in the service of the Amir.

Wittingly or unwittingly, in their narratives and photographs they tried to convey the romance and adventure which have unendingly created the allure of the fabled Orient. Moreover, not a few got themselves entangled in this exoticism or were carried away by their role as modern-day adventurers. Jewett, for example, the aforementioned engineer who stayed in and near Kabul from 1911 to 1918 in order to install

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30 For an introduction to the subject, see E. W. Said, *op. cit.*

31 R. Byron, *The Road to Oxiana* (London, 1937; repr. 1994), p. 105.

32 How difficult it was for Westerners to enter Afghanistan at the turn of century is best described by F. A. Martin, *op. cit.*, pp. 308-9.

the country's first power plant, remarked self-complacently when he crossed the border back into British territory on his first leave after two years in Afghanistan:

> Now we began to meet the tourists in motors and tongas going to see Ali Masjid; they are not allowed to go farther, but go away thinking they have seen the Khyber. I sat wearing my old topi [sun helmet] and smoking a pipe, with a Mauser on the seat beside me, my feet on a bag of rupees, and looked down on the tourists with scorn.[33]

The change in attitude of these narrators, their fascination for the peregrine world and the subliminal self-indulgence in their role as cultural mediators may be taken as supporting evidence that the lure of exoticism can distort information no less than chauvinism.

Perhaps the clearest proof of this colouring of sources is the frequent self-representation of their authors as Orientals. The comparison between the portrait of the spruce Jewett clothed in a suit and tie, his hair parted, and his self-portrait taken in Afghanistan speaks volumes (figs. II.1 and II.2). Here he is wearing a turban and Afghan dress. His face is hidden behind a long black beard. He holds his head upright, but turned sideways, allowing his gaze to wander. Sitting cross-legged on a roof next to a water-pipe, everything in his posture reveals relaxation, pride and serenity. Just like a chameleon, the foreigner apparently assimilated to local fashion and behaviour, no matter how transparent this pretence may be.

Jewett's transformation, of course, is no isolated case. Many travellers to Afghanistan before and after him have done the same. The French merchant J.-B. Tavernier, famous for his six journeys to Turkey, Persia and India in the middle of the 17th century, one of which also took him through Afghanistan, fancied to be portrayed in an Oriental costume in the frontispiece to his publication (fig. II.3).[34] This picture is rather unusual, however, since the robe Tavernier is wearing was the one bestowed on him by no one less than the Persian Shah, 'Abbas II.

In the field, the dressing of a European in Eastern clothing may have had a vital function because disguise was a necessary means of protection at times. But the readership back home no doubt took the masquerade as a sign of merit due to exploration and adventure. When Afghanistan was a true hot spot at the time of the First Anglo-Afghan War, Alexander Burnes, the illustrious adventurer, head of British missions and author of two valuable narratives, was portrayed in local costume by the officer Eyre (fig. II.4). Burnes was eventually murdered during the initial uprising of the townspeople at Kabul. He had preferred to live almost unprotected among the locals while the British Army encamped outside the town. Camouflage was indisputably advisable for the pioneering adventurers travelling through Afghani-

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[33] M. J. Bell (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 188.

[34] J.-B. Tavernier, *Six voyages de Jean Baptiste Tavernier qu'il a fait en Turquie, en Perse, et aux Indes* (Paris 1676).

stan,[35] thus some pretended to be dervishes or Armenian merchants.[36] But the cliché of the "Oriental" Burnes is, above all, the product of Orientalism, the fascination with the unknown and mystified. The same obviously accounts for the painting of Captain Mackenzie, Burnes' contemporary, who tried to impress his countrymen with this picture at home as an Afghan nobleman (fig. II.5). In actual fact, however, he spent the last part of the war in a rather undignified manner – in Afghan captivity.

Even half a century later, when there was less need to pretend to be an Oriental, the physician Gray had his portrait symbolically taken in Afghan robes (II.6). Gray undeniably gained a deep insight into life at the Kabul court, where he served the Amir between 1889 and 1894. But how grotesque must his first reception at "The Court of the Amir" have been, which he recounted as follows:

> The Princes and the officers were dressed in European military uniforms, with astrakhan hats, and though this was an Oriental court no one was seated on the ground. Contrary to Oriental etiquette we took off the turbans which we had been wearing, for it seemed better to act according to Western ideas of courtesy than to attempt to imitate the customs of Orientals, of which we then knew very little.[37]

The interlude of the First World War, the time of characters like Lawrence of Arabia and the German Wassmuth operating in Persia, briefly renewed the need to disguise oneself. However, this time the primary motivation for doing this was the need not to be discovered by or reported to antagonists belonging to the rivalling European power. A German mission adventurously crossed the Iranian desert into the territory of neutral Afghanistan with the aim of persuading Amir Habibullah to enter the war and engage the British at the frontier. This would ideally have forced the latter to open an Asian front and have distracted their forces from the European battlefields. The attempt failed, however, and the members of the mission were forced to return to Europe separately. Von Hentig, the political head of the mission, left Afghanistan incognito by way of China, whereas the charismatic Niedermayer, to whom we owe one of the most outstanding collections of early photographs of Afghanistan, traversed Russian Central Asia and Persia.[38] During his adventurous travels he pretended to be Haji Mirza Hussain (fig. II.7). The portrait of "Haji" Niedermayer fully stands in the tradition of the portraits of the "Orientals" Tavernier, Burnes, Gray and Jewett, which were all unmistakably directed at a home public.

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[35] See R. Vigne, *op. cit.*, p. 153; C. Masson, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. vii-viii; Durie's narrative in M. Elphinstone, *op. cit.*, p. 601. A. Vámbéry journeyed as the dervish "Resit Efendi". See A. Vámbéry, *Travels in Central Asia* (London, 1864; repr. New York, 1970), p. 203.

[36] The missionary J. Wolff about J. Harlan. J. Wolff, *Researches and Missionary Labours among the Jews, Mohammedans, and other Sects* (Philadelphia, 1837), p. 180; also J. Wolff, *A Mission to Bokhara* (London, 1969), p. 4.

[37] J. A. Gray, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

[38] W.-O. von Hentig, *Meine Diplomatenfahrt ins verschlossene Land* (Berlin/Vienna 1918); O. von Niedermayer/E. Diez, *Afghanistan* (Leipzig, 1924); O. von Niedermayer, *Unter der Glutsonne Irans* (Dachau, 1925);

The photo of Rybitschka is yet another example (fig. II.8). The Austrian WWI officer was forced to spend years in Kabul after fleeing from a Russian detention camp in Transoxania. In the portrait, he is wearing a turban and an Afghan coat. Standing there with his arms crossed and with a misty look in his eyes, he exudes the same pride and experience of adventure that can be found in the portraits of earlier Oriental travellers.

This self-mystification of Afghanistan travellers was perpetuated even after the gradual opening of the country to Westerners in the 1920s. The German doctor Börnstein-Bosta, for example, prefaced his book with his portrait in a "traditional Kabuli costume" (fig. II.9).[39] Likewise, the Swede Aurora Nilsson, who had married an upper-class Afghan in Berlin and got trapped afterwards in his harem in Kabul, allures anyone interested in her ordeal as a clichéd Oriental woman (fig. II.10). She appears hidden behind a silk veil and cloaked in a chador on the title page of her narrative with the telling title *The Flight from a Harem* (*Flykten från Harem*, 1928). The chador she is wearing, incidentally, is not an Afghan dress, and the photo was taken in a Berlin studio.[40]

The more Afghanistan became accessible, i.e. the less unusual visits to the country became, the more the air of adventure obviously faded. Still, the aura of the unique and exotic remained. Rybitschka, who was mentioned earlier on here, stopped at an overland caravanserai near the end of his stay in the country. On entering, he felt like he was plunging into an epoch of the past. He was enthralled by the magic of the Orient, of which there is so much to be heard in Europe and often so little to be found in Asia any more. Everything had elegance and style, while elsewhere the East had already changed beyond recognition due to European influence.[41] Robert Byron, considered by many to be the father of modern travel writing, had a similar experience. Unable to find a single liquor store on his arrival in Herat, where "The Road to Oxiana" had led him after traversing Persia in 1933, he noted in clear terms: "Here at last is Asia without an inferiority complex."[42]

Of course, more recent foreign travellers to Afghanistan and authors of travelogues neither dressed up as Afghans nor did they revel extensively in the adulation of the mysterious East. But despite the new sobriety of the reporting, the old mystifications still shimmer through, even in their narratives. A case in point is the last entry in Rudolf Stuckert's diary. The Swiss had spent the winters in Afghanistan during the Second World War as an architect and city planner. When he left after six years (1940-46), he relaxed at the Deans Hotel in Peshawar, the famous stopover for foreigners on their way to the Khyber. There he drew a sobering balance of his experi-

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39 F. Börnstein-Bosta, *Mandana baschi: Reisen und Erlebnisse eines deutschen Arztes in Afghanistan* (Berlin, 1925).

40 See the Nilsson files in the German Foreign Ministry Archives, R80584.

41 E. Rybitschka, *Im Gottgegebenen Afghanistan* (Leipzig, 1927), p. 196.

42 R. Byron, *op. cit.*, p. 105

ence. Eating, sleeping, writing letters, going for walks, enjoying the fresh air of spring, the first flowers and the hustle and bustle in the streets, Stuckert only then began to realise why some people wondered how he had been able to endure the primitive world of Afghanistan for so long.[43]

Ultimately, this is all that is left of the myth of Afghanistan – a partly romantic idea of its backwardness, which, in fact, still affects the perception of the country in the eyes of the Western media to this day. If we take descriptions of Kabul as an example again, we see that in contrast to 19th century authors, foreigners visiting the city in the 20th century started to value it. Forbes noted in the 1930s that for her Kabul 'has a beauty like nothing else on earth', although the Afghans would not appreciate their capital because it was not sufficiently modern.[44] Perhaps no one has summarised this romanticism better than Bouvier, who came on a visit almost two decades after Forbes: 'When the traveller from the south beholds Kabul, its ring of poplars, its mauve mountains where a fine layer of snow is smoking, and the kites that vibrate in the autumn sky above the bazaar, he flatters himself in feeling that he has come to the end of the world. On the contrary, he has just reached its centre.'[45]

V The circumstances of the recording

The problems with the reliability of sources produced by foreigners are not limited to attitude, though. The precarious conditions which most foreigners experienced present a factor that also needs to be taken into account. Elphinstone, the first author of a comprehensive ethnography of Afghanistan, or the then "Kingdom of Caubul", questioned the quality of the late 18th century travel account by Forster. The latter

> travelled with caravans during the night; saw little of the country he passed through; and had no communication with the inhabitants, except in towns; and, even there, his intercourse was restrained by the alarm so natural to a man who has entered on an untried adventure. The same uneasiness may, perhaps, have given a colour to the objects which he saw.[46]

For reasons of fairness, one should add that Elphinstone himself never set foot on the soil of today's Afghanistan and nevertheless wrote one of the most critically acclaimed studies on the country.

His criticism is, of course, a valid argument. Hardly any of the foreign reporters moved around freely in Afghanistan, and this restriction causes one to question how objective and well-informed their reports really were. If we recall what the war cor-

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[43] R. Stuckert, *Erinnerungen an Afghanistan*, 1940-1946 (Liestal, 1994), p. 212. Martin remarked similarly (F. A. Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 308): "After several years spent in Kabul, one experiences a sense of elation when the time comes for leaving it." See also M. J. Bell (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 183, and A. H. Grant, "A Winter at the Court of an Absolute Monarch", in *Blackwood's Magazine*, vol. 180 (Nov. 1906), p. 612.

[44] R. Forbes, *Forbidden Road: Kabul to Samarkand* (New York, 1937), p. 48.

[45] N. Bouvier, *L'usage du monde* (Paris, 1963 ; repr. 1985), p. 329.

[46] M. Elphinstone, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

respondent Hensman had to say about Kabul, we should bear in mind that he was only there at a time of conflict. The full passage is certainly one of the better sketches of Kabul at the time, but the author openly admitted that his comments were only general impressions after a hasty visit, patrolling with the British cavalry through the bazaar streets in 1879. As Hensman put it:

> Our ride through was necessarily a hurried one – it is never good policy to make long halts when traversing for the first time the streets of a conquered city [...]. That it was seen under abnormal circumstances should, of course, always be kept in mind.[47]

The restriction on movement was not only a hindrance to early travellers and wartime reporters. The specialists working in Afghanistan at the turn of the 20th century often moved around the capital under guard, either for their own security or simply because the city's authorities wanted to check on their movements. The members of the Hentig-Niedermayer expedition, for example, were detained during most of their stay in Kabul in 1915/16, and they were only allowed to leave their residence if they were escorted. Another example of this limitation is the above-cited case of Aurora Nilsson, who was forced to live in a harem. Her account is certainly a highly valuable insight into Afghan home life in the 1920s, but how representative can her descriptions of the life outside be if she was only able to catch glimpses of it through the eye-slit of her chador on the few occasions when she was allowed to leave the house in company?

VI Conclusion and outlook

Most sources relevant for writing a modern history of Afghanistan present an outside view of contemporary life in the country. They are strongly opinionated, coloured with attitudes prevalent at the time. Thus, the information they provide is often distorted. Afghan historiography has extensively exploited these materials, but sometimes this has been done with little caution. As a result, more than a few of the prejudices and simplifications have found their way into history books, albeit in a more moderate form. With the exception of some excellent scholarly studies by authors like Gregorian, Schinasi, Grevemeyer or Noelle-Karimi, histories of modern Afghanistan have often perpetuated old clichés. In fact, much of the existing literature on Afghanistan nourishes our image of the land of the wild and uncivilised, of the backward and raw, or of the romantic and pure.

This is not only a problem in historiography. It should be a warning that some of the prejudices presented in this essay echo attitudes to Afghanistan and Afghans that are frequent today. Western media and politics have styled the country at the Hindu

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[47] H. Hensman, *op. cit.*, p. 66. Moorcroft was only able to get a superficial impression of the city, too, because the period of his stay "was one of continual bustle and alarm" (W. Moorcroft, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Panjab*, vol. 2 [London, 1841], p. 376). By contrast, both R. Vigne, *op. cit.*, p. 183, and A. H. Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 598, emphasised that they were allowed to move around freely.

Kush the "theatre of the ultimate clash of civilisations", where global standards are said to have entered into conflict with an obsolete society in response to 9/11. Afghanistan is associated with the sinister Taliban, diehard religious fanatics, neo-feudal drug lords, impenetrable tribalism and oppressed womenfolk. In positive terms, it is seen as the land of crude romance as well as rich and unspoiled cultural traditions. What we read and hear, how we perceive the country in television reports and from our shiny land cruisers, or what motivates development tourists to buy burqas or mujahideen caps as souvenirs (or trophies) of their adventure into the wilderness of the civilised world – none of this is new. The modern perspective on the country, its people and its culture in general not only resembles the mystifications of the colonial period, but is actually rooted in them.

After the colonial era, whose end can be seen in the so-called War of Independence or Third Anglo-Afghan War of 1919, the iconising of Afghanistan as the "Wild East" has incessantly been continued. Since then, Afghanistan has repeatedly been styled the scene of conflict between modernity and the archaic, progress and backwardness.[48] This idea can be rehashed when one speaks about the communist regime and the reasons for its failure. It reappears in the societal dichotomy of the 1960s and 70s, when the flourishing urban elite in the capital became increasingly isolated from its rural environment. And we encounter the same phenomenon in the legendary "nightmare parliament" which King Amanullah held at Paghman in 1928. This first Western-style parliament of Afghanistan was witnessed by the British news correspondent Roland Wild. With a sense of irony and humour, he described how the designated "Members of Parliament" had their beards shaven off for this occasion. They were compelled to put on frock coats and take off their turbans. "In Rome, Paris, Berlin, Venice, and London, men wore hats when outdoors" and so would "the citizens of the new Afghanistan", according to Amanullah.[49] The king was toppled by a brigand from the mountains the following year. It is difficult to say what is more irritating about this story: the enforced Westernisation or the mockery expressed by the Western reporter. In the future, the Afghan identity will depend on how Afghans want to see themselves. New research will hopefully contribute more objective Afghan historiography to this process. The Afghan identity will also be affected by how the outside world sees the Afghans, however. Having said this, there is a saying from Amir Habibullah that is worth remembering in this context: "The man inside the house knows better than the man outside the house."[50]

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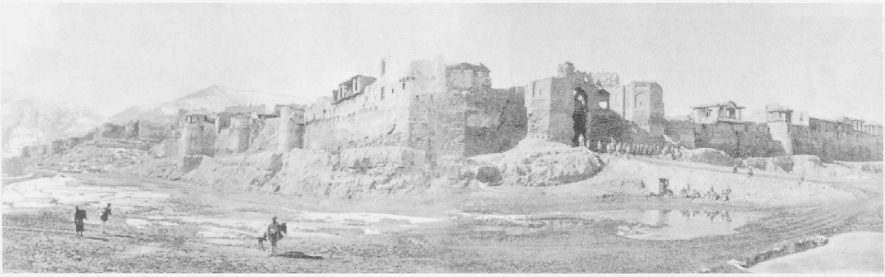
48 This phenomenon is still a topical issue today. It has recently been studied on a more general level as "the standstill in the Islamic World" by D. Diner: *Versiegelte Zeit: Über den Stillstand in der islamischen Welt* (Berlin, 2007).

49 R. Wild, *Amanullah: Ex-King of Afghanistan* (London, 1932; repr. Quetta 1982): p. 161.

50 See Dane Collection, India Office Records Library (IOR) Mss Eur D659/2.

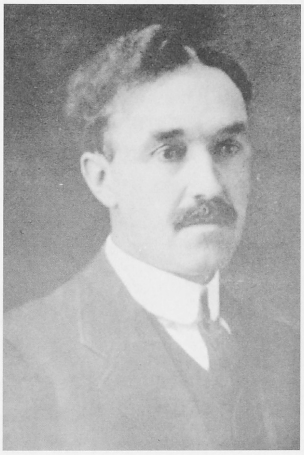
I.1 ***The Remnants of an Army*** **by Lady Elizabeth Butler, oil on canvas, 1879 [published in B. Omrani/M. Leeming (eds.),** ***Afghanistan: A Companion and Guide*** **(New York/Leicester/Hong Kong, 2005)]**

I.2 ***Bala Hissar from south-east corner*****, panorama photograph by J. Burke, 1879/80 [published in O. Khan,** ***From Kashmir to Kabul*** **(Munich/Ahmedabad, 2002)]**



Source: (below figures part II) a) A. C. Jewett [published in M. J. Bell (ed.), *An American Engineer in Afghanistan: From the Letters and Notes of A. C. Jewett* (Minneapolis, 1948)]; b) A. C. Jewett near Kabul [published in *ibid.*]; c) J.-B. Tavernier [published in V. Ball (ed.), *Travels in India by Jean-Baptiste Tavernier* (New Delhi, 2001)]; d) A. Burnes [published in M. Barthorp, *The North-West Frontier* (Dorset, 1982)]; e) Capt. Mackenzie [published in F. Sale, *A Journal of the Disasters in Afghanistan* (Franklin, 2002); bottom row, from left to right: f) J. A. Gray [published in J. A. Gray, *At the Court of the Amir* (London, 1895)]; g) O. von Niedermayer [published in O. von Niedermayer, *Unter der Glutsonne Irans* (Dachau, 1925)]; h) E. Rybitschka [published in E. Rybitschka, *Im gottgegebenen Afghanistan* (Leipzig, 1927)]; i) F. Börnstein-Bosta [published in F. Börnstein-Bosta, *Mandana baschi* (Berlin, 1925)]; j) A. Nilsson [published in A. Nilsson, *Flykten från harem* (Stockholm, 1928)].

II.1 A. C. Jewett



II.2 A. C. Jewett at Kabul

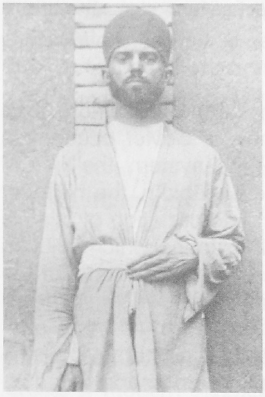
II.3 J.-B. Tavernier

II.4 A. Burnes

II.5 Capt. Mackenzie

II.6 J. A. Gray

II.7 O. von Niedermayer



II.8 E. Rybitschka

II.9 F. Börnstein-Bosta

II.10 A. Nilsson