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## Catastrophe at Kabul

The British invaded Afghanistan in 1839 with high hopes. Before they fought a single Afghan, officers were fighting, soldiers were on half rations and cannons were abandoned.

By: MICHAEL FATHERS

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Foreign armies have always, and unwisely, dismissed Afghanistan's fighters. I can remember as early as 1979, several months before the Soviet invasion in December of that year, listening to a U.S. official in Peshawar, once the winter residence of Afghan kings, mocking the small groups of local tribesmen who opposed Kabul's isolated communist rulers. These stubborn insurgents saw off the Soviets as they had seen off the British before—and will soon have seen off the Americans as Afghanistan slips back into the rule of warlords and the Taliban.



battlefield James Rattray's 1848 portrayal of Kabul and its fortress, Bala Hissar, with British encampments in foreground.

William Dalrymple's book is more than timely. "Return of a King" is about an invasion by one imperial power hoping to thwart a perceived (but misread) threat from another imperial power. The rivalry between Britain and Russia for control and influence in Central Asia was known on the British side as "the Great Game" and by the Russians as "the Tournament of Shadows." It began as Britain's control over India spread and deepened after the Napoleonic wars, coinciding with Russia's move south into the Khanates of Central Asia. The fault line was Afghanistan, the only gateway south into the Indian subcontinent.

Britain invaded Afghanistan in 1839 because it believed Russia was about to get there first. (Mr. Dalrymple shows that the Russians had rejected such a plan.) The British ousted a popular ruler, Dost Mohammad Khan, who had sought friendship with them, but was wrongly believed to be pro-Russian. He was replaced by a puppet, Shah Shuja, a haughty former king who had lived in exile in India under British protection for over 20 years.

The British army entered Afghanistan through Baluchistan and the Bolan Pass. The invasion force comprised 21,000 Indian and European soldiers, no fewer than 38,000 camp followers and 30,000 camels to carry baggage. Three hundred camels were earmarked to carry the military wine cellar. The army was a wreck before it had fought a single Afghan, writes Mr. Dalrymple. Commanding officers were squabbling, cannon had been left behind, soldiers were on half rations and facing the burning Afghan summer in winter uniform.

Luck however, was on their side. Exaggerated reports of their might and bribes led to important defections, and Kandahar, the old capital of southern Afghanistan, surrendered. Two months later, the impregnable fort of Ghazni was taken by subterfuge on the march north to Kabul and its defenders were routed with the loss of fewer than 20 British dead. Eight months after crossing the Indus and leaving India, the British marched into Kabul without a shot being fired. What followed this extraordinary success was the rapid isolation and collapse of an occupying army and the unraveling of an imperial plan to install a puppet regime in Afghanistan.

The story of Britain's humiliation is legendary among Afghans. The author's deep research provides a whole new take on almost every aspect of that story. Mr. Dalrymple is a skilled storyteller and fills important gaps, mining new sources in St. Petersburg, Kabul, Lahore, New Delhi and London. He found letters and records involving the Polish-born noble Ivan Vitkevitch,

who was Russia's man in Central Asia and whose secretive movements in Bukhara, Persia and Afghanistan so worried the British. His rival was the linguistically clever and resourceful young Scotsman Alexander Burnes, whose seduction of Afghan women outraged tribal leaders. The picture of the occupation of Kabul is almost orgiastic in the way the British were said to have seduced Afghan women of all classes, including favored concubines. On the Afghan side, Mr. Dalrymple uncovered a haul of narrative poetry in Kabul that details the reaction to every aspect of the British invasion, occupation and retreat.

Mr. Dalrymple's writing is sly, charming and clever. His histories read like novels. ("As far as he and his courtiers were concerned this was not an unjustified, unprovoked and unnecessary British invasion of an independent country," the author writes of Shah Shuja. "This was the return of a king.") This latest book delights and shocks as he points a finger at both sides for their deceit, treachery and cruelty. The final chapters are horrifying and extraordinarily graphic as an army of 5,000 troops and cavalry and 14,000 camp followers, frozen, starving and exhausted, are wiped out over five days after abandoning Kabul.

The grand historical sweep of Mr. Dalrymple's book reveals the hubris of British officials and their rejection of expert views from agents on the spot; the bumbling and squabbling among military commanders; incompetence in high places and the ease with which officials jumped to the wrong conclusions. There are numerous parallels to contemporary events, but Mr. Dalrymple does not belabor them.

"Return of a King" is probably the final book in a trilogy on India under the rule of Britain's East India Company. Mr. Dalrymple's earlier works, "White Mughals" (2002) and "The Last Mughal" (2006), covered the easy relationship between British officials and Indian rulers in the 18th century and ended with the Indian mutiny in 1857. From then on power in India was taken away from the company and institutionalized under Parliament and the monarchy in London. An elite corps of professionally trained civil servants ruled India, and the era of the adventurer and fraternization between the two races came to an end. Arrogance and torpor took over.

Few come out well from Mr. Dalrymple's magnificent account except perhaps the wily Dost Mohammad Khan, who returned to the throne that had been grabbed from him, as if the war had never taken place.