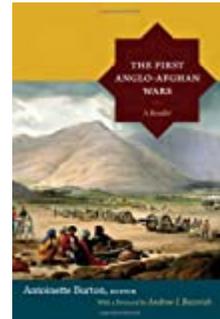




Antoinette Burton, ed. *The First Anglo-Afghan Wars: A Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. x + 272 pp. \$89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-5650-9; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-5662-2.



Reviewed by Kate Imy (Rutgers)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

In 2013, several leading State Department officials informed American undergraduate and graduate students who had won scholarships to South and Central Asia that a primary goal of the US government was to recreate the ancient "Silk Road" and thus facilitate open trade and communication in the region. By focusing on rebuilding an ancient history, these officials optimistically proposed to build the future without acknowledging the more recent past. In fact, recreating the "Silk Road" in the twenty-first century sounds remarkably similar to the "Scientific Frontier" envisioned by British officials who, in the midst of military engagement in Central Asia, focused on protecting the trade and security of British India. In Antoinette Burton's *The First Anglo-Afghan Wars*, it is clear that, rather than a benign story of trade and cross-cultural engagement, the dominant trend of international relations in Afghanistan during the last two hundred years has been war. A failure to see the disharmony between stated government goals and on-the-ground military actions illuminates the longer narrative of patchwork failures in the conflicts in Afghanistan. As Burton suggests, many nineteenth-century officials and authors were antiwar and pro-empire simultaneously. These contradictions and complex paradoxes about the relationship between commerce, culture, war, and em-

pire are at the heart of Burton's fascinating and rich historical reader, which is an essential guide for students and scholars of empire and war in South and Central Asia.

In her introduction, Burton acknowledges that the current armed conflicts in Afghanistan are the impetus for her study, recognizing that "these sources allow us to put twenty-first century struggles over Afghanistan in historical perspective and remind us of how fragile and precarious imperial power has been on the ground for would-be conquerors in Afghanistan during modern times" (p. 1). The organization of the book in four sections similarly emphasizes the military history of the region above other social, economic, and cultural transformations. The first section, "Strategic Interests on the Road to Kabul," highlights British efforts to enter into Central and South Asian military and cultural networks leading up to the 1839 capture of Kabul. The second section, "The First Anglo-Afghan War, 1839-1842: Occupation, Route, Defeat, Captivity," concerns the humiliating defeat of British forces in Kabul and its transformation into a relic of historical memory that would guide subsequent British intervention. The third section, "The Second Anglo-Afghan War, 1878-1880," details the wider implications of British intervention by focusing on the

contested foreign policies of Russia, Afghanistan, and India, and by placing them in a wider context of overland imperial competition. Finally, "The Great Game, 1880-1919" focuses on how Afghan leaders acted as intermediaries between the Russian and British imperial projects, which relied on frantic mapmaking and border drawing, and culminated in Afghanistan's attempted invasion of British India, a third war, nominal recognition of independence for Afghanistan, and the continuation of unofficial skirmishes that undermined such concepts as borders and sovereignty.

While this organization leaves questions about the nonmilitary changes that happen over time, particularly between 1900 and 1919, it helpfully places military conflicts in direct conversation with one another. It also opens up debates about recurring themes in imperial history. For example, the trading of insults, affronts, and challenges to sexual potency in several documents remind readers that these wars were at least in part contests of masculinity in which diverse actors redefined and shaped understandings of gender in an international context. Additionally, different representations of "religion" suggest its varying political weight and validity in references to "jihad" among Afghans, such as the so-called mad mullah Saidullah, who led Pushtuns against British forces, and the Easter celebration among soldiers who prayed for the victory of "Holy Russia" (p. 233). At the same time, there is relatively little attention to discussions of British Christianity in the imperial project. This is surprising considering the evangelical currents that were common among imperial and East India Company officials in the decades prior to the Indian Uprising of 1857.

One of Burton's greatest contributions for students and scholars is in her efforts to include a wide range of perspectives that add different textures to the subjects discussed. While documents include the observations of well-known leading British colonial officials, such as Winston Churchill and Lord Curzon, Burton also includes the testimonies of British women captives in Kabul, Russian officials, and soldiers; newspaper reports on Afghan women; and accounts by Indian language teachers. These carefully selected documents suggest the difficulty inherent in attempting to hear subaltern voices. While endeavoring to shift the focus of imperial and military histories from battlegrounds and diplomatic centers, these documents open up questions about the reliability of primary sources. For example, Mohan Lal's biography of Dost Mohammed Khan contains many examples, arguments, and references to a text by Mountstuart El-

phinstone, while the works by Florentia Sale and a female captive at Kabul deliberately criticize the eyewitness accounts of other authors in order to portray their own narratives as factual. Such documents do the double-work of indicating that authors with truncated access to power, through the often patriarchal and racial hierarchies of imperial rule, exhibited added pressure to validate their claims in reference or opposition to other more established authors. These documents also suggest that actors had their own concept of historical "accuracy," as they read, examined, and questioned the accounts and histories of others, resulting in vastly different narratives with contrary political goals.

Since the text is a reader rather than a manuscript, a few events, terms, and transformations occupy a large imaginative space without necessarily getting clear and thorough treatment. For example, the fascinating document by W. G. Osborne detailing the court of Ranjit Singh sheds light on the use of formal and informal diplomacy across South and Central Asia in the early nineteenth century. However, the portrayal of the "old, even ancient, rivalry between native kingdoms" is less convincing (p. 35). Further engagement with Purnima Dhan's *When Sparrows Became Hawks: The Making of the Sikh Warrior Tradition* (2011), which details the rise of the Sikh warrior tradition, would have showed how localized military labor markets in this region helped drive the constant renegotiation of alliances and animosities between powers. Similarly, references to the Indian Uprising of 1857 appear throughout the text but leave unanswered questions for scholars of South Asia: for example, why was the East India Company and British Empire able to regain control over India, when it failed in Afghanistan in 1842? The overlap of officials, such as Henry Havelock, may make readers wonder what such men learned (or did not learn) from one conflict to the next. The broadly imperial experience of others, such as Robert Wilson, who served in the Napoleonic Wars and expedition to Egypt, also provides students with the chance to think about which policies and strategies were empire-wide, and which were adaptations to particular regions and cultural currents.

After reading this text, scholars and students of war and empire will be able to engage with several wide-ranging historical themes. These include the role of religious revivalism across cultures, shifting understandings of imperial liberalism, changing patterns of warfare within both Europe and in South Asia, and legacies of dismantling of vast military labor markets and warrior cultures in favor of European-led forces. Also, readers

may note the later emphasis on news correspondents and journalists in place of soldiers and imperial officials as prominent voices of narratives of warfare. Students can discuss complex issues, such as the intersection of war, empire, and race, for even R. D. Osborn, who blamed British aggression for the needless conflicts in the region, labeled Afghans as "revengeful, passionate, and too ignorant to forecast the consequences of their actions," reminding readers that even authors critical of imperial power employed the discriminatory rhetoric of imperial warfare (p. 162). For additional clarity, undergraduate students may have benefited from historical maps and

additional footnotes denoting historical names of places, ceremonies, and weaponry, which vary in spelling or terminology from modern usage. Scholars would also value a more comprehensive bibliography of the primary sources.

Overall, Burton's impressive collection of documents offers a great deal to students and scholars alike. It will enliven classroom debate in courses on imperialism, warfare, and South and Central Asia. The book provides a much-needed history of recent and contemporary warfare, especially in Afghanistan, South Asia, and the Middle East.

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