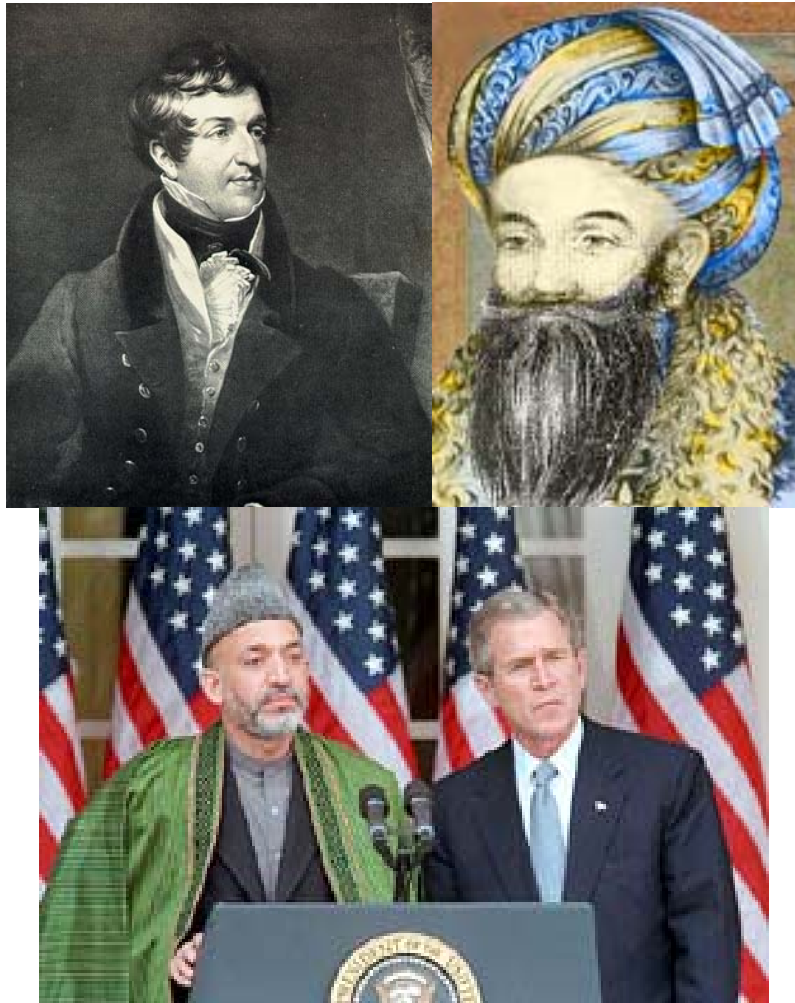


“Ex oriente lux” ... John Cam Hobhouse invades Afghanistan¹

Peter Cochran



Sixteen years after Cato Street, in 1836, the Great Reform Act had been passed. Representation, though far from universal, was on a much fairer basis, and John Cam Hobhouse had a seat in the Cabinet, as President of the Board of Control for India. He had authority over the East India Company, which ran events on the ground out there (messages took three months to get to Calcutta). Viscount Melbourne (his friend, husband to the late Caroline Lamb), was Prime Minister, and Viscount Palmerston (Melbourne’s brother-in-law) Foreign Secretary.

The government again needed something for people to be frightened of. Russia, it was decided, was threatening India. They had troops in Persia who “had as great a distance to march back to St. Petersburg as onward to the capital of Hindustán”.² They had the Shah of Persia in their pockets, and through him, were making overtures to various Afghan chieftains, including Dost Muhammad, the Emir of Afghanistan himself, with a view to getting invited in.

The Shah of Persia was currently laying siege to the frontier city of Herat. There, argued the Brits, you could see the Russian menace clearly; but Nesselrode, the Russian Foreign

1: For this section I have consulted the following: Lady Sale, *A Journal of the Disasters in Affghanistan, 1841-2* (John Murray, 1843); J.A.Norris, *The First Afghan War, 1838-1842* (Cambridge 1967); Sir Percy Sykes, *A History of Afghanistan* (2 vols, Macmillan 1940); Auckland Colvin, *John Russell Colvin* (Oxford 1895); Michael Joyce, *My Friend H* (John Murray 1948); Robert E. Zegger, *John Cam Hobhouse a Political Life 1819-1852* (Missouri 1973); and *The First Afghan War – Disaster for the British*, at <<http://www.jmhare.com/history6.htm>>

2: McNeill, *Progress of Russia in the East*, quoted Colvin p.85.

Secretary (previously Pushkin's censor, though he couldn't speak Russian), assured them that Russia had not "the smallest idea of injuring the tranquillity of the British possessions in India".³ The Earl of Durham, Our Man in St Petersburg – an old Whig chum of Hobhouse's – wrote that he could "discern" in the Russians "no hostile designs upon our Indian Empire".⁴ But, as with the Tories in 1820, and Bush and Blair today, evidence was irrelevant. Hobhouse had a word with the young Queen Victoria about it:

I mentioned to Her Majesty the Russian Ambassador had said the Russian Government disavowed all intentions of pushing forward the Persians towards the Indus, to the danger of our Indian Empire, but that there was good reason to apprehend that they were the instigators of this movement on the part of the Shah. Her Majesty smiled, and said that "of course the Russians would deny any such motives – but that their word made but little difference".⁵

In October 1838,⁶ Hobhouse sent a dispatch to Lord Auckland, the Governor-General, advising him to keep an eye on Afghanistan ...

... to counteract the progress of Russian influence in a quarter which, from its proximity to our Indian possessions, could not fail, if it were once established, to act injuriously on the system of our Indian alliances, and possibly to interfere even with the tranquillity of our own territory".

Hobhouse had since 1820 become the thorough politician, a master of saying something clearly while not saying it at all. He advised Auckland further about ...

... the adoption of any other measures that may appear to you desirable in order to counteract Russian influence in that quarter ... should you be satisfied ... that the time has arrived at which it would be right for you to interfere decidedly in the affairs of Afghanistan.⁷

Auckland had, as George Eden, once proposed to Annabella Milbanke, the future Lady Byron, who had almost accepted him – if only she had ...

Hobhouse droned on to Auckland:

We are aware that we have recommended to you a course of policy and a series of measures which may require great exertions, and entail upon your revenues sacrifices only to be justified by the difficulties of your position. We are also aware that in carrying our arms beyond the Indus we may appear to contemplate schemes of aggrandisement which every consideration both of justice and policy would induce us to condemn. But in truth, there is nothing aggressive in that which we propose ...⁸

This doublespeak, from the best friend of the author of *Don Juan*!! (though Hobhouse rarely read *Don Juan*).

In exile in the Punjab, with a harem of six hundred, was Shah Shujah, who had once ruled Afghanistan, but who had been ousted by Dost Muhammad as long ago as 1809. As payment for a safe retreat in Ludhiana he had given Ranjit Singh, debauched Maharajah of the Punjab, no less a present than the Koh-i-Noor diamond.

Advised by his russophobic political secretary, William Hay Macnaghten, Auckland, the Governor-General, asked Ranjit Singh to invade Afghanistan himself, and place Shah Shujah on the throne. Ranjit Singh, who knew Afghanistan and the Afghans better than the English

3: Quoted Sykes, op. cit., II p.405.

4: Quoted Zegger, op.cit., p.257.

5: BL.Add.Mss.56559 ff. 178r.-v. (Tuesday July 29th 1838). Hobhouse's daughter, Lady Dorchester, changes Victoria's words to, "of course the Russians would deny participating in the aggression; but their words made very little difference, except when founded on facts" (*Recollections of a Long Life* V p.159).

6: Colvin, op. cit., and Norris, op.cit. p.89, echoing Colvin, both have "June 25th 1836"; but Hobhouse records no Afghan business at that time. His diary (BL.Add.Mss.56560), shows him drafting the paper to Auckland, passing it round for comment, and sending it, between October 10th and 16th 1838.

7: Quoted Colvin, op. cit., p.87.

8: Quoted Joyce op. cit., p.288.

did, refused, but agreed to let an English force through his territory (nowadays, North Pakistan), in order to install Shah Shujah as a puppet. Accordingly, an English (in part, native Indian), force of 21,000 men (with 30,000 camels), was drawn up on the frontier. They had no experience of mountain warfare, or of sub-zero conditions, and their commander, Sir Henry Fane, had resigned from the army, seeing certain doom ahead.

But Hobhouse was optimistic. On November 19th 1838 he wrote in his diary, “The Newspapers have lately been full of Indian news and politics, and the success of M’Neill and the rigour of the Indian government have given a lift to us – *ex oriente lux* – but we do not feel certain of the raising of the siege of Herat.”⁹

Did they want the Persians to raise the siege of Herat, so that they could pull back – or press on with it, so that they could advance? At this point, the Persians raised the siege! There was no longer a Russian threat! But the cabinet in London remained unanimous. Afghanistan must be invaded. As later with the *General Belgrano* – the enemy might change his mind.

The greedy desire to extend the Empire still deeper into Central Asia is obvious – before the oil and gas fields there were even dreamed of.

This was also before the Crimean War caused the army to be re-organised more professionally. There was no system of organised supply. The army was fed by another army of 40,000 camp followers, *à la* Mother Courage: “a huge moving city of shops”.¹⁰ The principal English gun was a muzzle-loader unchanged since Waterloo. Commissions were purchased; seniority and experience counted for nothing. An officer took his silver with him, and his wine chest. 85% of soldiers were illiterate.

The invasion force started out on February 23rd 1839. Shah Shujah went with it. By March 11th it was down to half-rations. The English were surprised to find Afghanistan a dry, waterless place. Snipers harassed them constantly. However, they entered Kandahar (bribing their way in), and there Shah Shujah was “crowned”. Supplies were replenished. The English, assured by Shujah that his welcome would be tumultuous, were further surprised when hardly anyone turned up for his coronation.

The army now advanced on Kabul, to unseat Dost Muhammad. The fortified city of Ghazni stood in their way, but, again by bribery, they worked out that one gate was undefended, and determined to blow it open. However, too many people blabbed, and the defenders were ready after all. Despite this, the sappers did mine the gate, even though at the first try the fuse went out. Later, a bugler sounded the retreat when he should have sounded the charge: but they still took the city.

Upon Ghazni being taken, Shah Shujah ordered fifty of its defenders, men and boys, to be beheaded. Word of this got out, and Shujah’s future as the new Emir of Afghanistan was doomed. He received a cool welcome in Kabul, which Dost Muhammad quit to go north into Turkestan. Dost Muhammad, Qu’ran in hand, had tried to exhort his followers to “remember that they were Moslems and adjuring them fight the invading British or die”;¹¹ but they all ran away.

Palmerston and Hobhouse were delighted. Hobhouse, ever the historian, announced that the standard of a civilised nation had been carried to the banks of the Indus for the first time since the days of Alexander the Great. For their success so far, Auckland was made an Earl, Keane a peer, and Macnaghten a baronet. The English settled in at Kabul, wining and dining and playing lots of cricket. When winter came, they even attempted (without success), to teach the Afghans to ice-skate. The Taleban had not evolved yet, and Afghan women possessed a surprising degree of freedom, so many Anglo-Afghan affairs blossomed – though tragically many officers sent south to India for their wives and children. Other ranks were not so permitted, and trade in the Kabul brothels correspondingly increased.

Supplying the occupying force was difficult, and very expensive. But without it, Shah Shujah could not survive.

9: BL.Add.Mss.56560 f.22r.

10: Macmunn, quoted Sykes op.cit., II p.4.

11: Sykes II p.11.

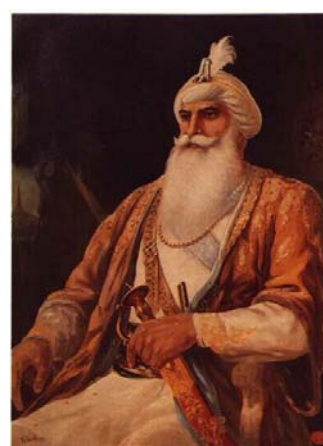
Returning from Turkestan, Dost Muhammad defeated one English force sent to fight him – and at once entered Kabul, and surrendered! He was pensioned off to Ludhiana, where Shah Shujah had lived when exiled by *him*.



Dost Muhammad



Shah Shujah



Ranjit Singh

With Dost Muhammad out of the way, it might seem that the English occupation could no longer be justified. But now the reality of Afghan politics began to make itself felt. Shah Shujah's followers were incompetent, greedy, and corrupt. The English found Shujah himself untrustworthy. Massive bribery was necessary to keep the Afghan chieftains quiet, and to keep the passes safe. It became a huge drain on the English budget, which Calcutta ordered to be reduced. Macnaghten began by cutting down on the sweeteners, and at once chaos ensued.

Auckland – once nearly Annabella's husband – promoted the sixty-year-old, gouty, short-sighted General William Elphinstone to be military C.-in-C., Kabul. He was Miss Mercer Elphinstone's cousin, and hadn't seen action since 1814. His promotion was suggested by none other than Fitzroy Somerset – once Hobhouse's one-armed enemy, and later to gain perfect immortality as Lord Raglan, the man who "ordered" the Charge of the Light Brigade. Elphinstone was carried to Kabul in a palanquin.

On November 2nd 1841, Captain Alexander Burnes and four other officers were hacked to death in the Kabul streets. The head of Burnes (who was known to the locals as "Sikander"), was placed on a pole. Violence erupted everywhere. The stores were badly situated, and had to be abandoned. Several sorties out of the English cantonment ended with the troops cut to pieces. Palmerston saw the writing on the wall, and refused to send reinforcements.

Macnaghten was offered a parley by Akbar Khan, son of the pensioned-off Dost Muhammad. Dressed in frock coat and silk hat, he rode out, and was unhorsed and shot. His head, and his armless and legless torso, were, again, strung up for display.

On January 6th 1842, the dreadful retreat from Kabul started. Elphinstone led out 5,000 troops, hundreds of women and children, and 12,000 camp followers. They had only the clothes on their backs. The snow was three feet deep. In the first day they covered five miles, snipers firing at them constantly. Hundreds froze to death every night. Akbar Khan offered to assist the women and children (he took Elphinstone and several women hostage), but massacred the men.

Lady Fiorentia Sale, wife of the English second-in-command at Kabul, wrote a diary of these events. Her account just of the first day's march is hair-raising:

After passing through some very sharp firing, we came upon Major Thain's horse, which had been shot through the loins. When we were supposed to be in comparative safety, poor Sturt [*Lady Sale's son-in-law*] rode back (to see after Thain, I believe): his horse was shot under him, and before he could rise from the ground he received a severe wound in the abdomen. It was with great difficulty he was held upon a pony by two people, and brought into camp at Khoord Cabul.

The pony Mrs. Sturt [*Lady Sale's daughter*] rode was wounded in the ear and neck. I had, fortunately, only *one* ball in my arm; three others passed through my poshteen [*sheepskin coat*] near the shoulder without doing me any injury. The party that fired on us were not above fifty yards from us, and we owed our escape to urging our horses on as fast as they could go over a road where, at any other time, we should have walked our horses very carefully.

The main attack of the enemy was on the column, baggage, and rear guard; and fortunate it was for Mrs. Sturt and myself that we kept with the chiefs. Would to God that Sturt had done so likewise, and not gone back.

The ladies were mostly travelling in kajavas [*camel litters*], and were mixed up with the baggage and column in the pass: here they were heavily fired on. Many camels were killed. On one camel were, in one kajava, Mrs. Boyd and her youngest boy Hugh; and in the other Mrs. Mainwaring and her infant, scarcely three months old, and Mrs. Anderson's eldest child. This camel was shot. Mrs. Boyd got a horse to ride; and her child was put on another behind a man, who being shortly after unfortunately killed, the child was carried off by the Affghans. Mrs. Mainwaring, less fortunate, took her own baby in her arms. Mary Anderson was carried off in the confusion. Meeting with a pony laden with treasure, Mrs. M[*ainwaring*]. endeavoured to mount and sit on the boxes, but they upset; and in the hurry pony and treasure were left behind; and the unfortunate lady pursued her way on foot, until after a time an Affghan asked her if she was wounded, and told her to mount behind him. This apparently kind offer she declined, being fearful of treachery; alleging as an excuse that she could not sit behind him on account of the difficulty of holding her child when so mounted. This man shortly after snatched her shawl off her shoulders, and left her to her fate. Mrs. M[*ainwaring*].'s sufferings were very great; and she deserves much credit for having preserved her child through these dreadful scenes. She not only had to walk a considerable distance with her child in her arms through the deep snow, but had also to pick her way over the bodies of the dead, dying and wounded, both men and cattle, and constantly to cross the streams of water, wet up to the knees, pushed and shoved about by man and animals, the enemy keeping up a sharp fire, and several persons being killed close to her.¹²

Lady Sale's journal was published in 1843, by John Murray III, the son of Byron's publisher.

On January 13th 1842, just one man – Doctor William Brydon – reached Jalalabad. He had either two or three bullets in his body. He was the only survivor of the expeditionary force which Hobhouse (who was by now in opposition), had encouraged to invade Afghanistan four years previously.

Among those who had perished had been Hobhouse's nephew, Lieutenant John Byron Hobhouse. His uncle reacted with stoic patriotism:

Received a letter from Fitzroy Somerset telling me that he had received information from Sir Jasper Nicholls that my nephew John Byron was killed in action on the 12th of January 1842 at Jugdulluck. My brother, who would have had the estate and title, was killed at Quatre Bras in



Lady Fiorentia Sale.

12: Lady Sale, op.cit., pp.237-9.

1815. This young man, at about the same age with my brother, and also presumptive inheritor of my property in land, has also fallen in the service of his country – enough for two successive generations of one family. My nephew had not contributed to my poor brother’s comforts, but he behaved gallantly at Caubul, and the close of his short career has been honourable. He was born at Rome in the spring of 1817 – Lord Byron and myself were at his baptism (at the Casa Margherita, under the Pincian Mount), and we were his godfathers.¹³



Remnants of an Army, by Elizabeth Butler.

In the Commons, Macaulay seemed to say that the Afghanistan failure was a question of financial loss merely, and that “the throwing away of the timber duties would be found in the end to be a greater misfortune and disaster to the country than those in Affghanistan.” Lord Stanley (later, as the Earl of Derby, Prime Minister), attacked such crass materialism thus:

... when the right hon. gentleman has made his calculations of his pounds, shillings, and pence, in which we are financially to measure those great disasters which have befallen the British armies in Affghanistan – that he has admitted all those frightful anticipations which must necessarily arise to any man who gives a moment’s consideration to the subject; and when the right hon. gentleman declares that this great Mahometan success was falling like a spark on tow, and that the freemasonry of Islamism was extending from Morocco to Coromandel in an empire which rests on the *prestige* of opinion, who shall calculate, even in a financial point of view, the expenditure, the ruinous and extravagant expenditure, that we must be led into if we intend to support our character in India ...?

To Hobhouse, Stanley gave the benefit of the doubt:

Will the hon. gentleman the late President of the Board of Control [*Hobhouse*] agree with him [*Macaulay*]? I know that that right hon. gentleman’s knowledge of India and his official connexion with that department will have taught him to estimate more truly, and I shall say, more humanely, than the right hon. gentleman (Mr. Macaulay), even the financial embarrassments which our army has sustained in Affghanistan ...¹⁴

13: B.L.Add.Mss.43744, f.77r.-v.: diary entry for Tuesday July 9th 1842.

14: *The Times*, April 12th 1842.



Derby



Melbourne



Palmerston

Stanley spoke charitably. There is no sign in Hobhouse's writings that he had been taught a more true estimate of what had happened, or that he did feel any shame or guilt at the terrible events which his 1836 initiative had set in motion – still less at any advantage which “the freemasonry of Islamism ... extending from Morocco to Coromandel” might derive from it.

In April 1842 Shah Shujah was, unsurprisingly, assassinated. Elphinstone died of dysentery in captivity. Akbar Khan was poisoned. Dost Muhammad became Emir of Afghanistan again, and died in his bed. Auckland was made First Lord of the Admiralty, and gave his name to a city in New Zealand. Melbourne ...

Later in 1842 the English returned in force, forced the passes by climbing *higher* than the Afghans and shooting *down* at them, blew up the Kabul bazaar, and burned most of the city to the ground. They invaded again in 1878, leaving in 1880.

Hobhouse came in for a lot of trouble when it looked as if he had “edited” several documents sent home by Alexander Burnes and others. Though he was cleared of malpractice, the scandal ended his political career. But it was a smokescreen, covering a much greater disgrace, which was the way he, Palmerston, and Melbourne, had not only allowed the naked face of English imperialism to be revealed once and for ever, but had allowed it to get a bloody nose.

Throughout the whole saga, the Russians had barely moved a muscle.