

# SIR WILLIAM HAY MACNAGHTEN AND THE FIRST AFGHAN WAR

By Ken McNaughton

Sir William Hay Macnaghten was the second son of Sir Francis Workman Macnaghten, Chief of the Clan Macnaghten from 1832 to 1843. William was a central figure in the First Afghan War of 1838-1842, a major disaster for the British Empire—with eerie parallels to events of our time.

Figure 1. Map of Afghanistan with key cities ([www.worldatlas.com](http://www.worldatlas.com)).



The East India Company arrived in India at a time when the Mughal Empire was in disarray. The Company initially established trading centers in large cities, but gradually spread throughout the country.

This became a tremendous asset to the expanding British Empire, which is why India became The Jewell in Queen Victoria's Crown and she was called the Empress of India. But in 1837 the British did not feel all that secure and its successes there attracted a lot of attention from other countries, some of whom wanted a piece of the pie. Today, a lot of world attention is focused on the countries above the Indian Ocean between Saudi Arabia and India—Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan (Fig. 1). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pakistan was still part of India and Iran was called Persia. To the north of these countries there were numerous Muslim Khanates, each equivalent to a tribal chieftdom ruled by a Khan. Borders were often loosely defined, which led to disputes if one Khan tried to expand his territory into his neighbor's.

Still further north the Great Russian Bear suffered losses when in 1206 an illiterate military genius named Teumjin unleashed the Mongol whirlwind and became known as Genghis Khan. In 1807 intelligence reached London that Napoleon Bonaparte, emboldened by his run of brilliant victories in Europe, had proposed to Tsar Alexander I that they should together invade India and wrest it from British domination. His breathtaking plan was to march 50,000 French troops across Persia and Afghanistan and there join forces with Alexander's Cossacks for the final thrust across the Indus River into India. But Napoleon and Alexander fell out and Napoleon instead marched on Moscow. Hopkirk [1] claims that, ever since, Russian foreign policy has been influenced by dread of invasion and encirclement.

The Russian threat to India seemed real enough. For four centuries the Russian Empire had been expanding at the rate of some 20,000 square miles a year. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century more than 2,000 miles separated the British and Russian Empires in Asia. By the end it had shrunk to a few hundred and in parts of the Pamir region, to less than twenty. British response vacillated between two policies. The 'forward' policy advocated getting there first, either by invasion or by creating compliant buffer states or satellites astride the likely invasion routes. The 'masterly inactivity' school argued that India's best defense lay in its unique geographical setting

—bordered by towering mountain systems, mighty rivers, waterless deserts and warlike tribes. A Russian force that reached India after overcoming all these obstacles would be so weakened it would be no match for a waiting British army.



**Figure 2. Sir William Hay Macnaghten forcibly placed Shah Shujah on the throne of Kabul but paid for it with his life (Ref. 3).**

And so the stage was set for the “Great Game,” a title made famous by Rudyard Kipling in “Kim” [2] whereby British and Russian spies set out to map the country between the two empires, prior to a showdown. It was a Cold War, but very real for the brave and inventive explorers and soldiers who ventured into unknown territory at great risk and endured incredible privations and brutality for their countries and their beliefs.

### WILLIAM HAY MACNAGHTEN

William Hay Macnaghten (Fig. 2) was educated at Charterhouse, went to Madras as a cadet in 1809, and in 1816 joined the Bengal Civil Service. He displayed a talent for languages, and published several treatises on Hindu and Islamic law. He married Frances Martyn in 1823 at the age of 30. His wife was already a widow and after William’s death she married into the Peerage. Whatever her charms, the family tradition is that good breeding was not among them and she is remembered for the remark that she had “married ‘igher and ‘igher and ‘igher.” William’s political career began in 1830 as secretary to Lord Bentinck, Governor General of India from 1828 to 1835, and for some years he was in charge of the secret and political departments of the Government Secretariat at Calcutta. In 1837 Macnaghten became one of the most trusted advisers of the subsequent Governor General, George Eden, Lord Auckland (Eden was also First Lord of the Admiralty. Two towns are named for him—Auckland in New Zealand and Eden in New South Wales). In 1837 William accompanied Lord Auckland on a tour of the North-West Provinces.

The ruler in neighboring Afghanistan was Dost Mohammed. Like all Afghan princes, Dost Mohammed had been schooled almost from birth in the arts of intrigue and treachery. In addition he had been born with other, more subtle qualities inherited from his Persian mother. All this had enabled him to out-manuever his several older brothers in the struggle for the throne of Kabul that followed the ousting of Shah Shujah—now in exile at Ludhiana, north of Delhi near the Nepal border—and by 1826 he had finally won it for himself. Unable to read or write, he had at once set about remedying this and, at the same time, restoring order and prosperity to his new domains. In 1838, feeling pressure from the west because the Persians coveted Herat and wanting to take control of Peshawar in India to the east, Dost Mohammed found himself in the dangerous game of playing the Russians against the British, and seemed to be favoring the Russians.

William Macnaghten’s favored candidate for the Afghan throne was the exiled Shah Shujah and on October 1<sup>st</sup> his boss, Lord Auckland, made public Britain’s intention of forcibly removing Dost Mohammed from the throne and replacing him with Shujah. Macnaghten, who received a knighthood, was appointed envoy to the proposed new royal court at Kabul. Forbes [4] tells us that Durand (perhaps Sir Mortimer Durand, Foreign Secretary to the Indian government, and one

of three related Durands in the area at the time), a capable critic, pronounced the selection an unhappy one, 'for Macnaghten, long accustomed to irresponsible office, inexperienced in men, and ignorant of the country and people of Afghanistan, was, though an erudite Arabic scholar, neither practised in the field of Asiatic intrigue nor a man of action. His ambition was, however, great, and the expedition, holding out the promise of distinction and honours, had met with his strenuous advocacy.' Because of anti-Russian feeling in Britain and India, the coming adventure enjoyed immense popular support, but not everyone was enthused. The Duke of Wellington, who had experience in India and had defeated Napoleon at Waterloo, was strongly against it, warning that where the military successes ended the political difficulties would begin.

## INVASION

The Army of the Indus, as it was officially called, consisted of 15,000 British and Indian troops including infantry, cavalry and artillery. It was followed by an even larger force, a rattle-taggle army of 30,000 camp-followers—bearers, grooms, laundry-men, cooks and farriers (to shoe the horses)—together with as many camels carrying ammunition and supplies, not to mention officers' personal belongings. One brigadier was said to have had no fewer than sixty camels to transport his own camp gear, while the officers of one regiment had commandeered two camels just to carry their cigars. Finally there were several herds of cattle, which were to serve as a mobile larder for the task force. In addition to the British and Indian units there was Shujah's own small army. The invasion force entered Afghanistan through the fifty-mile-long Bolan Pass in the spring of 1839.

Macnaghten had repeatedly assured Lord Auckland that Shujah's return would be rapturously welcomed by the Afghans. As they approached Kandahar they heard that Dost Mohammed had fled north, so they let Shujah's troops enter first, without a shot being fired. But at a spectacular military parade, barely one hundred Afghans turned up to watch. Macnaghten believed he could purchase the loyalty of the tribal chiefs through whose territories they advanced with British gold, with which he was well supplied. But this did not help at Ghazni, whose mountainside fortress had ramparts that were sixty feet high and massively thick. When a band of armed Afghans appeared on a hill overlooking the camp, British cavalry and infantry captured some of them. One of the captives broke free, shouted that Shujah was a traitor to the Faith, and stabbed a royal attendant. Shujah ordered all the prisoners to be killed on the spot. Forty or fifty prisoners, young and old, were hacked and maimed with long swords and knives.

A week later, on 30 June 1839, opposed only by a line of abandoned cannon, the British appeared before the walls of Kabul. Dost Mohammed had fled and the city surrendered without a shot being fired. The following day, Shah Shujah entered the city he had not seen for thirty years, with Macnaghten, General Keane and Alexander Burnes riding at his side. The British settled down to the daily routine of garrison life. Among them was Lady Macnaghten, bringing with her crystal chandeliers, vintage wines, expensive gowns and scores of servants. Forbes tells us: "Lady Macnaghten, in the spacious mission residence which stood apart in its own grounds, presided over the society of the cantonments, which had all the cheery surroundings of the half-settled, half-nomadic life of our military people in the East. There [was] the 'coffee house' after the morning ride, the gathering round the bandstand in the evening, the impromptu dance, and the *burra khana* [big dinner or celebration] occasionally in the larger houses."

But by 1841 (Fig. 3) William lost interest in his present task for he was shortly to become Governor of Bombay, his reward for placing the British puppet on the throne in Kabul. He liked to think that everything was under control. Ever since they had arrived two years earlier, the British had been making themselves at home in the exotic situation and invigorating climate. Wives and children of British and Indian troops came up from the hot and dusty plains of Hindustan. Some of the Afghan upper classes joined in the cricket, concerts, steeple-chasing and skating. Some activities, such as the womanizing and drinking, offended the Muslim authorities and devout majority. Tribes refusing to submit to Shujah's rule were punished and others were bribed with "subsides." On 3 November 1840, Dost Mohammed, realizing that further resistance was futile, surrendered to Macnaghten and was sent to India in exile.

**Figure 3. Painting by James Atkinson of Sir William Hay Macnaghten in 1841, the year of his death (National Portrait Gallery).**



Originally the British had occupied the Bala Hissar fortress but at the request of Shah Shujah, who wanted it to house his own troops and large household staff, Macnaghten, who had little or no military experience, had agreed to move the entire British force out of its walled security into hurriedly constructed cantonments (military quarters). On 1 November 1841 Alexander Burnes, who was due to take over from Macnaghten, was warned there was to be an attempt made on his life that night. Macnaghten argued with the officer in charge of the troops, General William Elphinstone, about how to handle the gathering angry mob, but no effective action was taken. Burnes and his brother were hacked to death and the British treasury next to his house was pillaged.

#### MURDER

On November 23<sup>rd</sup> the Afghans began to bombard the British position. They kept their distance, opening up a heavy fire on the tightly packed British squares with their long-barrelled matchlocks or jezails. Next day, the Afghans were reinforced by Mohammed Akbar Khan, son of Dost Mohammed, and the British were now outnumbered seven to one. Dost Mohammed, however, was still in British hands in India, and Macnaghten sought to create divisions between local chiefs to weaken their position. There were some intense negotiations, culminating in an arrangement on the evening of 22 December that Macnaghten would meet with Akbar the next day to finalize an agreement.

When General Elphinstone asked if it might be a trap, Macnaghten replied: "Leave it all to me. I understand these things better than you." Similar fears were expressed by one of the officers chosen to go with him, and his wife. Macnaghten said, "Treachery of course there is," and added, "Rather than be disgraced I would risk a thousand deaths." Next day Akbar and his party were waiting nearby on horsecloths spread on a snow-covered hillside and said "Peace be with you!" Captain Kenneth Mackenzie said, "I could scarcely prevail upon myself to quit my horse." When Akbar asked Macnaghten if he accepted the proposal made to him the previous night, Macnaghten replied "Why not?" Akbar had warned the other chiefs that Macnaghten was willing to cut them out and do a secret deal with him. Macnaghten asked who the several strangers present were but Akbar told him not to be alarmed, "We are all in the same secret." Then he

screamed “Seize! Seize!” Mackenzie and his two colleagues were pinned from behind. Macnaghten cried “For God’s sake,” and was dragged out of sight down the hill. Captain Trevor was brutally hacked to death in the snow. The other two were thrown into a dank cell. Lookouts reported this to General Elphinstone, less than half a mile away, but no move was made. That night, reports reached the garrison that Macnaghten’s corpse, minus its head, arms and legs, could be seen suspended from a pole in the bazaar, while his bloodstained limbs were being passed around town in triumph.

Akbar insisted that the British should leave Afghanistan as agreed and surrender the bulk of their artillery to him, as well as what was left of their gold, and that the hostages he already held be replaced by married officers, together with their wives and children. The weather was deteriorating rapidly and soon the passes to Jalalabad would be blocked. On 1 January 1842 an agreement was signed with Akbar. He would guarantee the safety of the departing British with an armed escort and the British would surrender all but six of their artillery pieces and three small mule-borne guns. At dawn on January 6<sup>th</sup> the once proud Army of the Indus marched out toward Jalalabad—eighty miles away across snow-covered mountains—and on to the Khyber Pass and India. There was an advance guard of 600 troops and 100 cavalry; the British wives and children on ponies and palanquins; the main body of infantry, cavalry and artillery; camels and bullocks carrying ammunition and food; and the rearguard. Several thousand camp-followers struggled along as best they could. On that icily cold winter’s morning, these 16,000 set out—without the promised escort or supplies of food and fuel they were expecting.

#### SLAUGHTER

No sooner had the rearguard left the cantonments than the Afghans swarmed on to the walls and opened fire on the British with their deadly jezails. From then onwards the harassment never ceased. The Afghan horsemen rode in among the troops, slaughtering and plundering, and driving off the baggage animals. Nor were the unarmed and helpless camp-followers spared. Soon the snow was crimson with blood, while the trail was lined with the dead and dying. Despite this the column pressed on, fighting off the Afghans as best they could. But weighed down by unnecessary baggage, and hindered by the presence of the terror-stricken camp-followers, the British only managed to cover five miles on the first day after leaving Kabul, with stragglers coming in until late at night.

And so the retreat continued, a struggling mass of soldiers and civilians, British and Indians, infantry and cavalry, baggage animals and guns. Around midday on the second day, Akbar himself put in an unexpected appearance, claiming to have come to escort them safely through the passes to Jalalabad. He also ordered Elphinstone to proceed no further that day, saying that he must first make arrangements with the chiefs of the tribe guarding the pass ahead, the Khoord-Cabool, to let them through. The next day, January 8, the straggling column entered the narrow, winding, four-mile-long pass. There was still no sign of Akbar’s promised escort, provisions, or safe passage. Indeed, it soon became evident to all but Elphinstone that he had persuaded them to halt so as to give the tribesmen time to position themselves with their jezails in the towering crags overlooking the pass.



**Figure 4. The last stand of the 44th Regiment of Foot at the village of Gandamak, where their bones can still be found (India Office Library).**

‘This morning we moved through the Khoord-Cabool Pass with great loss of life and property,’ recorded Dr. Brydon grimly in a diary reconstructed from memory on reaching Jalalabad. ‘The heights were in possession of the enemy, who poured down an incessant fire on our column.

Great numbers were killed ... and many more were wounded.’ As soon as the main body had reached the end of the pass, the tribesmen descended from their positions and set about butchering the stragglers. Some 3,000 of the garrison, including many women and children, were left dead in the pass that day, their frozen corpses stripped of precious clothing by friend and foe alike. While the massacre continued, Akbar himself hovered just out of sight, insisting that he was doing everything he could to restrain the local tribesmen. This was proving difficult, he protested, as even their own chiefs had little control over them.

The handful of officers and men who had fought their way out of the gorge, leaving behind them many dead and dying, now found themselves divided into two groups, one mounted and the other on foot. The fifteen-strong former group, to which Brydon had attached himself, decided to ride on ahead in the hope of reaching Jalalabad before their pursuers could catch up with them. The second, far larger party, consisting of twenty officers and forty-five other ranks, fought their way to the village of Gandamak, less than thirty miles from Jalalabad. They knew that if they could survive one more day they would reach the safety of the British garrison. But they soon found their way blocked by the Afghans. Overwhelmingly outnumbered, they realised that they stood little chance of reaching safety. Forming themselves into a square, and with only twenty muskets between them and two rounds of ammunition each, they prepared to sell their lives dearly in a last desperate stand (Fig. 4). Only four prisoners were taken by the Afghans, the rest of the group—most of them men of the 44th Regiment of Foot—being slaughtered to a man.

A week later, shortly after noon, a look-out on the walls of the British fort at Jalalabad spotted a lone horseman in the far distance making his way slowly toward them across the plain. He appeared to be either ill or wounded, for he leaned weakly forward, clinging to his horse’s neck. The horseman, whose head and hand were severely gashed, told them that he was Dr. William Brydon, a physician who had been in Shah Shujah’s service, but who had left Kabul with the British garrison. He was not the sole survivor. Besides the hostages held by Akbar, a number of sepoy and other Indians who had somehow escaped death by hiding in caves managed during the ensuing months to make their way home across the passes.

Lady Sale kept a diary and recorded what happened to the band of hostages. Forbes tells us: “At the ford across the Cabul river the cavalcade found Akbar Khan wounded, haggard and dejected, seated in a palanquin, which, weak as he was, he gave up to Ladies Macnaghten and Sale, who were ill.”

## REVENGE

Far from establishing a friendly rule in Afghanistan to buttress India against Russian encroachments, Britain had suffered instead one of the worst disasters ever to overtake one of its armies. Everyone, including the Duke of Wellington, blamed General Elphinstone for failing to crush the insurrection at the outset and Lord Auckland for embarking on such folly in the first place. The nation demanded vengeance. Lord Ellenborough replaced Lord Auckland as Governor General of India. On March 31<sup>st</sup>, Major General George Pollock forced the Khyber Pass with 8,000 men in three columns. As his flanking columns seized the heights, astonished tribesmen for the first time found themselves shot down from above. Two weeks later the relief column was played into the British garrison at Jalalabad to the Scots air ‘Oh, but ye’ve bin lang a’coming.’ They fought their way back to Kabul by the same route by which Elphinstone’s ill-fated columns had left only seven months earlier:

Everywhere there were skeletons, in heaps of fifties and hundreds. Gun wheels crushed the skulls of late comrades. The growing fury of the troops led to numerous excesses being committed against those who resisted the advance. They reached Kabul on September 15<sup>th</sup>. The enemy and Akbar had fled, Shah Shujah was dead and Kabul was kingless. Pollock decided to raze Kabul’s great covered bazaar—famous throughout Central Asia—where Macnaghten’s dismembered corpse had been hung nine months earlier. On October 11<sup>th</sup> they took down the Union Jack over the Bala Hissar fortress. Next morning the first units marched away from Kabul along the skeleton-strewn trail toward the Khyber Pass. For the time being, Britain was content to leave Afghanistan to the Afghans. Within three months, Shah Shujah’s son had been overthrown and Dost Mohammed was allowed by the British to return unconditionally to the throne—the only man capable of restoring order to Afghanistan.

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